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GIANNETTO

BY

LADY MARGARET MAJENDIE

G I A N N E T T O

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN 'BLACKWOOD'S MAGAZINE.'

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GIANNETTO.



CHAPTER I.

IT was one very lovely evening in the early autumn that I first became acquainted with the little village of San Jacopo.

I was staying at Nice with my two daughters, the youngest of whom had been ordered abroad for her health ; and occasionally, when wearied by the monotonous routine of our life, I used to amuse myself by making excursions of some days' length in the neighbourhood.

These journeys often brought me upon beautiful and secluded villages, unknown to the or-

dinary traveller, and passed by as merely far-off features of the surrounding landscape ; but seldom have I beheld a more picturesque scene than that presented to me by my first sight of San Jacopo.

The village lies in a bay, huge rocks closing it in on every side except on the south, where the sea ripples to its feet, intensely, wondrously blue, as only the Mediterranean can be. The sole access to it is by steep paths, cut in zigzag lines down the cliffs, in some places so steep that they become rugged steps, only to be trodden by man and the sure-footed mule. The main road of the Riviera runs some miles inland, and the fisher population live on from year to year undisturbed by visitors.

The sun had just gone down, and the afterglow of the warm south tinged every object with its golden light. The sea lay calm and still as a lake, scarcely ruffling itself into little glistening wreaths of foam, as it played with the base of the rocks. Myrtle and arbutus, and

masses of emerald vegetation, grew down to the very water's edge.

It was growing late, but I could not resist the temptation of going down into the village ; and I was well rewarded. Through quaint, narrow streets, overhung by the wide projecting roofs of the houses, I walked till a sudden turn brought me into the piazza of the village. It was large for so small a place. On one side the little church, with its tall slender belfry, and in the midst a large fountain—the clear water dripping over the side out of the broken lips of four quaint old lions.


Two or three steps led up to this fountain, and on and about these a group of peasants were assembled ; some sat, some leant over the edge ; all were talking and gesticulating, and a look of gaiety animated the whole scene. It was, I remembered, a *festa*.

In one corner of the piazza sat an old woman selling medallions, images, rosaries, &c. ; and now and then her shrill voice echoed through

the crowd, "Buy, buy, Signori ; for the love of heaven !"

Suddenly a side-door of the church, probably that of the sacristy, opened, and a loud, deep voice called out, "Olà, Carola, come here !" A tidy-looking woman left her doorway and hurried across to the church—she appeared to say something which I could not hear ; then the former voice exclaimed, "Certainly, certainly." The door was thrown open, and the village priest came forth and advanced towards me.

The Curato of San Jacopo was a tall angular man, with a mild and kindly expression of face. In any other than an Italian the large limbs and gaunt frame would have been awkward ; but there was a certain grace in his movements, and even in the way in which the scanty and rather rusty cassock hung closely around him. The courtesy with which he removed the three-cornered hat from his tonsured head, and bowed low, would have rivalled the



courtly welcome of the highest-born gentleman.

“Welcome, welcome, Signore!” he said, extending a long sinewy hand, with supple fingers; “without doubt you have heard of our picture, and would like to see it? Alas! it is becoming dark, and the morning light is best. But what matter? one cannot always choose!” and beckoning me to follow, he led the way towards the principal door of the church.

The peasants stood aside as we passed, looking after me with smiling, good-humoured faces. One among them especially attracted my attention—a tall youth, standing on the steps of the fountain, and leaning over the side. He was dressed in a fashion rather superior to that of his companions, and looked somewhat above them in intelligence, if not in rank. Though all those who stood round him were chattering and laughing gaily, he neither moved nor spoke, but stood motionless as a statue, with his eyes fixed on the water.

“Would you tell me, Signore,” I asked, “is that tall young fellow one of the village fishermen, like the others?”

“Who? where? Ah! it is Nencini you speak of. Yes, he is a fisherman; poor lad, he is sadly afflicted—dumb from his birth! Yonder is his mother, Carola—excellent woman! she is my housekeeper, and I have been able to give him something of an education; but he is a fisherman, without doubt. We are all fishermen here.”

“Dumb from his birth”—poor fellow! I looked back at him as we entered the church, the priest courteously holding back the heavy leathern curtain to let me pass. I was struck by the expression of the lad’s face—it could not be called bad; but there was a dark look of bitterness on it which sadly marred its beauty. I need hardly say that I had never before heard of the picture I was supposed to have come to see; but I did not betray my ignorance, for it would have deeply mortified the excellent priest.

The church was very small, but elaborately decorated. The side-altar of its patron saint, San Jacopo, was, above all, honoured — the altar, apse, and wall being quite covered with votive offerings,—little pictures of wrecks and storms, of miraculous draughts of fish, of broken boats, &c., with silver hearts of every size and weight, and, in front, a whole row of lamps burning, each in its little red glass.

Over the altar hung the famous picture, covered by a faded green curtain. After lighting two of the tall candles before it, the good priest drew aside the curtain, and allowed me to behold the treasure of San Jacopo.

It was a curious, very old specimen of Byzantine art—the Madonna and Child, almost black with age, and made more so by the huge flat crowns of beaten silver on the brows of the sacred figures. Something there was about it dignified and grand, as there often is even in the inferior specimens of that school.

The Curato was just beginning his explanations when a sound from without arrested his

attention ; shouts of laughter, and a curious sort of noise like the inarticulate roar of some enraged animal—then a shrill woman's voice, talking loudly.

“ Allow me, allow me, Signore ! a little moment,” he exclaimed, hurriedly quitting the church. Presently I heard his voice loudly remonstrating, and the sounds ceased. For some time he did not return, and I sat down on a bench in front of the sacred picture. After about ten minutes I got tired of waiting, and went to the door, intending to go out ; when, rather to my consternation, I found that it was locked. I could not help smiling, for it was very evident that the priest was so afraid of my escaping without hearing his story, that he had locked me in. There was nothing for it but patience, and I philosophically resigned myself to my fate.

The after-glow faded away ; the short southern twilight was over, and the little church grew darker and darker.

After an absence of about three-quarters of an hour, the priest returned through the sacristy, followed by Gian-Battista Nencini, the dumb lad.

Gian-Battista — or Giannetto, as he was usually called — seated himself in a corner of the church, sullenly twisting his broad-brimmed hat between his knees ; while, as if unconscious that a moment had elapsed since he left me, the good priest continued his discourse just where he had left off.

“Behold, Signore, what grace ! what benevolence ! how natural the attitude ! The picture has not always been here. Heaven knows that San Jacopo might have been a great and flourishing town by this time had it always been with us. No, no ! in the fourteenth century it was carried off by a certain Ceccolo degli Orsini, one of the Roman princes, they say, a great *condottiere* by sea and land. He carried it as a banner for years ; but, by the intervention of the saints, it was preserved

from spears and swords, and it won for him the battle of Turrìta, in the Valdichiana, when he was in the service of the republic of Siena. Some eighty years ago it was sold in Rome (by whom, it is not known), but it was bought for a French convent, and sent off by sea from Città Vecchia. By the miraculous ordinance of heaven the ship went down, and the picture was washed ashore. It was found on the beach by the fishermen, and brought back once more into the church. Alas! some of the drapery was damaged, but it has been well restored by a young artist who passed through the town; and behold, the principal parts, the two faces, are intact. Since it has been here, many are the good deeds it has done. Look at this picture"—pointing to one of the votive offerings—"see the raging sea, the sinking boat, the man swimming for his life! That man was Pietro Nencini, father of Giannetto yonder. At the moment he was sinking he called on the Santa Madonna of San Jacopo, and just as he

called, he felt dry land ! He lived to die in his bed, and leave his widow to be my house-keeper. Ah, it was a wonderful preservation ! Many a time has poor Carola entreated the intervention of Madonna and San Jacopo to restore speech to her son ; but—what will you ? —’tis the will of Heaven.”

The priest paused to take breath, and I asked him what had been the cause of his leaving me so abruptly. He bent down, and spoke low, that Giannetto should not hear.

“It was those lads,” he said. “In their idle hours they are always laughing and mocking Giannetto ; and when I am not there, they drive him half mad. Heaven help me ! at such times he is a wild beast, and even I can scarcely calm him. Cruel ! cruel ! Why cannot they leave the poor boy alone ?”

The priest turned angrily round, looking at Giannetto. He continued, with a sigh, “Sometimes I have thought that some doctor might cure him. I have heard that such things are

not impossible ; but I have not the means of paying one, and his mother still less."

Poor Giannetto sat still in the dark corner of the church, leaning back against the wall. The sullenness had faded out of his face now, leaving on it a look of depression which went to my heart. I felt the most profound pity for one so young, writhing under so grievous a burden, evidently chafing and rebelling against it, unable to resign himself, and growing more and more embittered by his isolation. But for that look of bitterness he would have been very handsome. Slightly made and tall, his figure was muscular and active ; and I learnt afterwards that he was one of the most skilful and successful fishermen on the coast.

The priest remained silent for a moment or so, and then, with a short sigh, he turned away, and began replacing the curtain over the sacred picture, saying as he did so, " Vossignoria should visit us on our great day, the feast of San Jacopo. Ah ! then he would see great

things ; for the pilgrims come from far and wide, and the flowers and garlands are many. Behold, that large silver heart was given by a lady from near Mentone—a great and rich lady. Her husband had been at sea, and she awaited his return ; but for three weeks after his vessel was due at Marseilles it did not arrive, and Signora Francesca vowed a silver heart to every church dedicated to San Jacopo (his patron saint) within fifty miles, if he should return safely. At the end of forty days the ship came in, but the husband had lost one leg, so she naturally reduced the number of miles to twenty, and our church was happily within the distance.”

The priest would have run on for ever in this strain ; but the gathering clouds warned me that I must not linger if I hoped to regain the little town where I had slept the previous night before total darkness.

I took out what money I had with me, and offered it to the priest for his poor. He took

it in his hand, jingling it for a moment, and then, in a half-hesitating way, he said, "A thousand pardons, Signore ; but if Vossignoria did not object, I have a little fund in hand which I am trying to raise to send Giaunnetto to a great doctor at Nice ; and we have not any really in need at this moment. San Jacopo be praised ! the fish came asking to be caught this year. So if you do not object, might I ?"

I was about to give a ready assent, when a sudden idea struck me, and I said, "Why should not Giannetto return with me to Nice, see the doctor, and hear whether anything can be done for him ?" The priest caught at the offer with great eagerness, and I could see how much his good heart was set on the poor lad's cure.

While I was speaking, I had forgotten that we had moved towards the door of the church, close to the corner in which Giannetto sat, when suddenly I felt my hands seized and kissed with all the fervour of Italian gratitude ;

and looking round, I saw a pair of large dark eyes fixed upon me, changed in expression, mute and imploring, shining with the light of a new hope, so intense and eager that they haunted me long after. Alas! at that moment it flashed across me what a cruel disappointment I might be preparing for these poor, simple folk. Could dumbness such as this be cured? I felt a strong conviction that it could not; and I was almost angry with myself for having suggested the idea. "But remember," I said, "do not hope too much. The most learned and cleverest of doctors can do no good if it be not the will of God."

The priest answered me very gravely, "True, true, Signore. And if this fail, Giannetto will know that it is God's will, and we will pray for patience for him."

Before an hour was over, Giannetto had taken leave of his mother, we had mounted the hill, and were on our road towards Nice—a large lamp-like moon turning the gentle sea into a sheet of silver.

CHAPTER II.

NOTHING could be more attentive than Giannetto's manners to me during our three days' walk back to Nice. He seemed to think constantly of my comfort, sheltering me from the sun, insisting upon carrying my knapsack, and evidently most anxious to show that he was devoted to my service. We carried on a sort of conversation, he answering my questions either by signs or by writing on a slate ; for, unlike most of his equals, he could both read and write well. I learnt in this way something of his former history.

Pietro, his father, died when he was a child but two years old, leaving him and his mother Carola dependent on the charity of the village.

The good priest made her his housekeeper, paying her a very moderate sum weekly for services which hitherto had been done for him voluntarily by the village women. Perhaps his little allowance of meat was curtailed in consequence, and it certainly was all that Carola could do to make the threadbare cassock hold out as long as possible while this weekly payment lasted ; but, when Giannetto was still a very young boy, he began to earn something for himself, and at the age of sixteen he bought a share in a fishing-boat, and was able henceforth to support his mother by his own exertions.

Giannetto's partner in the ownership of the boat was a certain Pietro Zei, a man about ten years older than himself, and of him he spoke (or, I should rather say, wrote) with a hatred that almost amounted to ferocity. Pietro was a clever fisherman, and was looked upon by his younger companions as a leader and wit among them. Unfortu-

nately all his tastes were those of a tyrant ; he would laugh and torment Giannetto unceasingly, imitating the inarticulate sounds the poor fellow made, jeering and taunting him, till he worked him up into fury. The village lads were only too ready to follow his lead, and the consequence was, that Giannetto's temper, never very gentle, became more gloomy and morose every day, too often varied by fits of unbridled passion. In vain for many years had the priest striven to repress this spirit of cruel raillery ; although controlled in his presence, it broke out universally when he was not near. It is fair to say that I believe that Pietro and his fellow-tormentors little realised the pain they inflicted. They were cruel, partly from thoughtlessness, and a good deal from utter inability to understand the acute sensitiveness of the dumb boy, who, proud and disposed to be vindictive by nature, suffered from the humiliation of his infirmity to an unusual degree.

At the age of nineteen, three years before I first came across him, Giannetto had saved money enough to buy a boat, and release himself from his partnership with Pietro. He succeeded well in his trade, and his mother and the Curato had great hopes that he would settle down resigned to his fate, and live, if not in content, at least in submission to the decree of heaven ; but, to their sorrow, it proved far otherwise. The good priest would often hold long conversations with him, telling him of the duty of resignation ; but the truths of religion seemed to have no effect upon him—his heart was one wild rebellion, untamed and unruly ; and it was in this condition of mind that I first found him.

We reached Nice before the great heat of the day set in, on a Sunday morning, but it was already hot and very dusty, and I was not sorry to consign Giannetto to the care of my Italian servant Beppo, and retire to wash, and change my clothes. My daughters, not expect-

ing my return till the following day, had gone to church ; and so, tired with my early start, and rendered drowsy by the increasing heat, I lay down on Helen's luxurious sofa and fell asleep.

I was awakened by the entrance of Beppo, who came to ask for orders. I told him I had none to give ; but he still lingered, and at last said, " Does the Signor Conte know anything about the young country lad he has brought home ? "

Knowing that Beppo was the kindest-hearted fellow in the world, I told him briefly the history of Giannetto. I saw that he was touched.

" Poor boy, poor fellow ! " he kept repeating ; " and I smiled at the queer noises he makes, beast that I am ! And the Signore says that they mocked at him ? *Diamine !* they deserve to have their tongues cut ! If you will excuse me, I fly to see that they have not stinted him in his macaroni. They are misers in this

hotel, veritable misers—and their wine of Asti no better than a *vin du pays*.”

Beppo was darting off, when I stopped him, being anxious to know what Giannetto was doing with himself down-stairs. Beppo twisted his hands together—“It was for that I asked the Signor Conte if he knew who and what he was. He is strange ! but very strange ! First, he sits down, then he stands up, then he walks backwards and forwards thus”—and Beppo shambling about the room, till I could scarcely forbear laughing ; “then he sits again, till a new idea strikes him—he leans out of the window, he walks anew. *Corpo di Bacco* ! what a restless individual it is ! One or two have spoken to him. Misé Brown, the maid of the Signorine, said something to him—a compliment, a remark, who can tell ?—but he made such a scowl at her, that she fled to me for protection, and has not ventured into the room since.”

“Never mind, Beppo,” I said ; “you now

know that it is all the restlessness of suspense. You see that he hopes that this may prove the turning-point of his whole life."

"But must he wait?" asked Beppo, with his usual energy. "Will not the Signor Conte write at once? There is the Doctor Bartolomei; to be sure he always goes into the country on Sundays. Then the Doctor Simon—he might come! But no, he is this day at Mentone—a consultation—an English Milord is there ill; and this morning he was sent for even out of his bed, and went off in a vetturino-carriage at full gallop. But how about the English doctor who attends our young lady? The Signor Conte has but to command. I speed to the English church; he will be there with his wife; I wait till he comes out; I bring him with me. Have I your permission?"

"Patience, patience, Beppo! the dinner! Man of energy, you forget the dinner!—*Chi va piano——*"

“*Va sano* ; the Signor Conte is right—he is quite right ; the poor lad must wait.”

Early in the afternoon I wrote to the English doctor who was attending my daughter, briefly stating the case, and begging him to come as soon as possible. I received an answer that I might expect him after the afternoon service, which, as the weather was hot, began at five o'clock.

About half-past four, Amy and I left our villa, intending to go to church ; but as it was still too early, we lingered on our way, unwilling to arrive too soon. A curve in the road brought us in sight of Giannetto, leaning moodily against a tree, and I went up to speak to him. I could see by the expression of his face that the strain on his nerves was very great, and thought it kinder not to leave him quite to himself ; so, telling Amy that we must give up the afternoon service, I asked her if she could think of anything we could take him to hear or see that would prevent his mind from


dwelling too much on the subject of his anxieties. Amy thought for a moment, and then said, "I have heard that the famous Franciscan, Fra Geronimo, preaches at Santa Lucia this afternoon at four o'clock; the sermon must be going on now, and it is said that the effect he produces is wonderful. Why not take him there?" I thought that at all events we might try it; so, desiring Giannetto to follow us, we took our way to Santa Lucia. The streets were crowded as we passed; all the happy-looking peasants from the country round seemed to have flocked together to enjoy the Sunday afternoon; they chattered gaily as they strolled along, interchanging merry greetings, delighting in their well-earned holiday. A little child, with his hands full of flowers, passed us with his mother, a comely peasant-woman; the child looked wistfully over his shoulder at Giannetto; something on his face gave him a wish to comfort him, for, suddenly darting back, he thrust the flowers into his hands.

We reached Santa Lucia, and found it full of people, who had thronged from far and near to hear the celebrated Franciscan preach. The sermon was apparently half over, but I would not for worlds have missed the part of it we heard. The theme was Patience ; the text, "Wait ye upon the Lord."

The face of Fra Geronimo was refined, and thin to attenuation ; the large eyes hollow and sunken, but gleaming as if the very soul looked through them upon this outer world ; his thin, nervous hands gesticulated incessantly ; his voice, powerful and somewhat harsh, now resounded through the church, now sank to a whisper so thrilling that it penetrated to the farthest corner.

"For what are we sent into the world ?" he was saying as we entered—"for what are we here ? To what end are we created ? Some say, to eat and drink ; some say, to make money ; some say, to love. There are who say, for pleasure ; there are who say, for

sin! I say—to suffer. Yes, brethren; I see you turn away your heads! For what are we sent, but to suffer? Look at the infant wailing as he comes into the world; mark the career of that child. Suffering begins at once; he suffers as he grows, he suffers as he learns, he suffers as he loves; behold, he suffers as he lives, he suffers as he dies! What would you? By suffering, the world was redeemed; by suffering, heaven must be won! And wherefore rebel? I say to you, brethren, take suffering to your hearts; bid it welcome. It is the greatest blessing that can be sent to you; it will wean you from this world, and raise your thoughts, your hopes, your prayers to heaven. You are men now—suffer, and you may be saints! Look on St Catherine, St John, St Peter—what were they but men and women like ourselves? Did not they, too, pass through the furnace of suffering? What are they now? Who can tell of the glory of the Kingdom? Who can



describe their robes of many colours, the jewels that adorn their brows? Behold," he cried, in a voice of thunder, bringing forward the large crucifix which stood in the pulpit—"behold, and see. Is there any sorrow like unto my sorrow? Alas! the flesh is weak and crying and wailing abound in the land—Rachel weeping for her children, and will not be comforted, because they are not. The dying wailing because they must die; the living weeping that they must live; the strong man laments that his strength endureth not, the weak that he has not known strength; the lame man bemoaneth that he cannot walk, the deaf that he cannot hear, the dumb that he cannot speak" (I felt Giannetto start and shiver). "I tell you, brethren, that for every pain endured here, a jewel is added to the crown, a joy to the heaven to come!"

The friar sank upon his knees, his face hidden in his hands. No mortal ear heard the prayer that was going up to God; but we

knew that he was interceding for the multitude around him—"I pray, not that ye may be taken away, but that ye may endure unto the end."

Slowly, and in awed silence, the crowd dispersed; and out of the dark church, from the faint smell of flowers and incense, we passed into full sunshine again. I looked at Giannetto; the beads of perspiration stood on his brow; his hands were clenched with a force that must have given actual pain. I longed for the power of reading what was passing in his mind. Was it still rebellion that vexed his spirit, or had even a faint idea of the preacher's high and lofty meaning penetrated into the bitter, saddened heart? Amy was struggling with her tears.

Calm and lovely it all looked in the throbbing light, silent but for the quiet, even plash of the sea; the air was heavy with odours from the gardens of violets and roses, and the warm scent of the sweet-bay rose up as we

trod the branches which had been allowed to grow too luxuriantly, almost across the path.

Under the verandah, overhung with cool, shadowy vine-leaves, Helen's couch had been drawn out; and there she lay, basking in the warmth, and looking better and stronger this evening than I had seen her for many a long day. The doctor had just arrived, and, with a strange feeling of anxiety and excitement, I called Giannetto, and led the way indoors.

The interview was not long. As I had feared, he held out no hopes whatever. Dumb from his birth! who had ever heard of such being cured? The fact which seemed to debar all hope was, that the doctor found the organs of speech perfect, only the power of utterance absent. He added, "You had better undeceive him at once—science is of no avail here; nothing but a miracle could impart a power denied by nature."

My conscience smote me when I heard the verdict. I could not help feeling that it

might have been better to have left Giannetto undisturbed, vaguely hopeful, in his village home, rather than thus to have crushed all hope for ever.

After the English doctor's departure, I told Giannetto, as gently as I could, what he had said, adding that he should see Dr Simon on the morrow, so that he should have more than one opinion on the matter. He stood without moving while I was speaking, and then, with a gentle, subdued manner, that went to my heart and brought the tears to my eyes, he took my hand and kissed it.

When Beppo came up to put out the lights that night, I asked anxiously what Giannetto was doing down-stairs. "He sits like a statue," was the reply. "I spoke to him ; I told him the English doctors knew nothing—were ignorants—bah ! one must tell lies sometimes—and I tell him the Doctor Simon, whom he will see to-morrow, is a marvel—a wonder ; and I think he still hopes."

Beppo's sympathetic eyes were almost overflowing ; so I did not reproach him, as perhaps I ought to have done, for still holding out delusive hopes.

The next morning M. Simon, the French doctor, called and saw Giannetto, at an hour earlier than he had appointed, and unfortunately while I was out. When I returned home I was met by Beppo at the door, with a face full of consternation—Giannetto had disappeared.

CHAPTER III.

I WAS very much alarmed when the whole day passed, and I heard and saw nothing of Giannetto. I could only hope and trust that he had gone straight home again. Beppo told me that the French doctor had been very harsh and rough. "Why could he not wait till my return?" I asked; for I felt that my presence would certainly have made things easier. "Ah, Signor *mio*, so I said; but he would not wait. I told him you would be in at once; but he would not wait. That doctor is a beast—a heart of stone—a horror! 'Morbleu!' he said, 'do you take me for a saint that I can cure a man who is dumb from his birth? Or would you make a fool of me?' They are all alike, these doctors; they think if a poor

fellow is of the lower class they may be as insolent to him as they like."

"And Giannetto, how did he bear it?"

"Poor fellow, he ground his teeth and clenched his hands; he went off to the kitchen, took down his bundle, and walked off without so much as good-day to you! I called after him to bid him be in for dinner, for I was sure that the Signor Conte would wish to see him again; but he paid no attention, and walked straight on."

This was all I could learn from Beppo. I next went to see Dr Simon, whom I found very much disposed to be impertinent. I could not help reproaching him strongly for his harsh treatment of Giannetto, and finally told him of his abrupt departure, and asked him what he would feel if he heard that he had committed suicide? He looked as much scared as I had hoped he would be, notwithstanding his "Ah, bah!" and I left him to digest the unpalatable idea.

I was met by Beppo in a sort of triumph, brandishing a broken piece of slate. Before leaving, Giannetto had written a few words on it, broken off the piece, and left it lying on the kitchen table. "Dear and noble Sir," were his words, "receive my thanks a thousand times; it grieves me not to see you again. I hasten home; for the heart will not bear to wish you good-bye.—GIOVAN-BATTISTA NENCINI."

There was nothing to be done. I determined to make another expedition to San Jacopo before finally leaving Nice, and meantime to do my best to forget the sad eyes that constantly haunted me.

The late autumn waned into winter, and it proved a bad, wet season. Helen caught fresh cold, and for some time we were very anxious about her. We grew tired of bustling, dusty Nice—Amy especially hated it; the perpetual sameness of the tideless sea wearied and dispirited her. It was quite a relief when, one

night, a frightful storm came up ; the sea lashed itself into waves mountains high, which broke roaring on to the beach ; the lightning played hissing over their foam-crowned tops ; and a never-ceasing roll of thunder shook the purple, pall-like sky. I stood out on the balcony, watching the sea, till the rain came on, suddenly, tremendously ; it fell more like the breaking of a waterspout than mere rain—drenching, pitiless, tearing down shrubs and trees, turning the roads into running rivers, and the garden into a sheet of water.

I stood watching it for a long time, wondering whether it would do much harm, when it flashed across me that San Jacopo must be suffering severely, closed in as it was by rocks and sea. Before going to bed, I resolved to pay another visit to my friends there. But *l'homme propose, Dieu dispose*. It was more than a month before I was able to leave Nice and carry out my intention. As before, I walked there, knapsack on my back, spending

about three nights on the way. The storm had done considerable damage to the main road, portions of which had been washed away, and only rudely mended to allow the diligences to run ; some of the bridges appeared actually dangerous, torn and shaken as they had been by the fearful force of the swollen torrents. Seeing these signs of devastation, I became more uneasy than ever as I drew near San Jacopo.

It was on a bright sunny morning that I arrived, and at sight of me a general shout was raised by children of all sizes and ages, who went rushing off to tell the Curato that the English Signore had come back.

I walked on through the streets, when I was suddenly met by Carola, running as fast as she could ; she had heard from the children of my arrival. She caught hold of my hands, she kissed them, crying between sobs and laughter, "Thanks, thanks be to God, you are come again ! And you bring me news ?

You have seen him? You know where he is? Did he return to you? Ah, answer! answer, Signore, for the love of heaven! my boy, is he with you?"

My very heart turned cold within me. What! had he never returned? Where was he, then? Just as I was about to speak, a gentle, firm hand was laid on Carola's shoulder, and the good Curato, parting the little crowd of children who were gaping round us, took me by the hand and drew me into the nearest house. Carola followed, repeating constantly, "Answer, Signore!—dear Signore! answer; where is he?"

I turned breathlessly to the priest, "And do you mean that he has never been home?"

"Yes, yes—he has been home; but he has gone again, and you then have not seen him lately?" "Alas! no"—and poor Carola sank down on a chair, sobbing as if her heart would break. Another woman, the owner of the house, whom I had not noticed before, but

who, I afterwards learnt, was Pietro's wife, Baldovinetta Zei, sat down by her, and, unable to offer any consolation, stroked her hand and cried also.

The Curato looked sadly changed, as if years had passed over his head in those few months. He glanced pityingly at the women, and then said, "Since Vossignoria has nothing to tell them, perhaps he will follow me. I should like to tell him what has passed, and hear what he thinks of it."

I rose and followed him. As we left the house, I heard a little low cry from Carola. Alas! she saw in my departure the vanishing of another hope.

The streets were crowded with people, watching me curiously as I followed the priest, who led me straight through the piazza to his own house. We entered, and with a movement of his hand he bade me be seated.

It was a small square room, the walls washed with yellow paint, and adorned with a

series of coloured prints of the stations of the Cross. Over the little stove hung a rudely-carved wooden crucifix. The only ornament in the room consisted of a little coloured wax figure of the infant Saviour asleep, lying under a glass case, and with two brass vases of gaudy artificial flowers on each side of it. The furniture, a square deal table and two wooden chairs, was of the roughest description.

The priest seated himself opposite to me, and leaning his arms on the table, fixed his eyes on my face, and said, very impressively, "Will Vossignoria tell me exactly what the doctors said?" I repeated their opinions as nearly, word for word, as I could recollect. The priest shuddered slightly, and repeated, to my surprise, "And Vossignoria assures me, on his sacred word of honour, that the doctors declared a cure to be impossible?" "It is too true," I answered. "They laughed at the very idea; they pronounced the dumbness to proceed from a defect, an incompleteness (if you

may so call it), which no science can remedy—that it is impossible, in short, that he should obtain the power of speech now, or at any future time.”

The priest was silent for a moment, evidently thinking deeply ; then he turned to me and said, “ Vossignoria will be astonished at what I have to tell him, and perhaps he may be able to help me to understand it. He remembers, doubtless, that it was on the Monday morning that poor Giannetto left Nice ; well, he must have walked night and day, for on Wednesday, after I had finished celebrating low mass, I found him crouched upon his knees in a corner of the church, having stolen in unobserved. He looked ill, but very ill, with a somewhat of despair in his face, which alarmed us all. For days he crept about his work like one in a dream. At that season the fish came in in shoals, and the village was very prosperous. I had at this time many talks with Pietro—I entreated, I implored him to let

Giannetto alone, and I believed that he did ; at least he promised me he would do so : but, alas ! youth is youth. I have reason to think that there was occasional ridicule at Giannetto's folly in having hoped to be cured, and that more than once he overheard it. On one occasion, for instance, a man came to the village who had been a singer in the chorus at the opera at Florence. He was a good-natured, merry fellow ; he laughed, and joked, and sang incessantly. Alas, my poor Giannetto ! he has a passionate love for music. He was never tired of listening ; and when the singer sang, his face became quite softened and happy. The man only stayed two days, and then went away. The fishermen, I fear—I am sure—laughed at Giannetto a good deal about that ; but they did not see him afterwards as I did, lying face downwards in the vineyard, weeping his very heart out. I was glad—yes, Signore, strange as you may think it, I was glad to see him weep, for I hoped that it

would soften the hardness of his despair. Alas ! has Vossignoria ever seen a torrent burst its bed and tear down shrubs and trees in its headlong career ? *Santi Apostoli !* such a torrent was the grief of my Giannetto. It left the rock more bare and hard than before, and swept away the small herbs and flowers, the little charities of life, till I scarcely knew him again. Alas ! he was to me as a dear son, and I have borne with him in patience and in tears."

Much moved, I held out my hand to the priest, who pressed it gratefully, and resumed his story.

"Without doubt, Vossignoria saw something of the frightful storm we had ; it is now a month ago. Alas ! it has put an end to the prosperity of the place for a long time to come. Has the Signore observed more than half the olive-trees are gone ? and we looked much to them for help when times were bad. Old Nicolo's cottage, that stood near the hill

in its own little vineyard, was completely washed away. Has Vossignoria remarked a little thread of water which comes down the hill just above the town? Well, that stream became a raging river. By the mercy of God it did not burst the embankment behind the church, but it carried away Nicolo's cottage and many a shed, and destroyed the gardens, and, worst of all, drowned two of the poor mules; their bodies drifted out to the sea, and we saw them no more. The storm began about five o'clock in the evening, and at the first sign of its approach, the boats all came homewards swiftly as birds on the wing. I stood on the shore and counted them as they came in, one after another, and the women stood with me watching. The morning had been fine and clear, and many of the boats had gone far out to sea—much further than usual—and we were very anxious. About seven o'clock the sea rose frightfully, and three or four of the boats were still missing—Masa-

niello's, our oldest fisherman, Pietro's, Andrea Castagno's, and Giannetto's. The wind was so high, that many a time we had to lie flat on the beach to avoid being blown off our feet ; and the women wept and wailed incessantly. About half-past seven the broken timbers of a boat were washed ashore. Ah ! if you had seen how the women flung themselves upon them, and almost fought as they strove to recognise the fragments. Alas ! a fearful cry from poor Andrea's wife told that she knew only too well that she was now a widow. Andrea's boat had been old and crazy, and he was building a new one—poor fellow ! He was not a good man, but she loved him, after the fashion of women. His body was washed up on the bank the next morning, about a mile from here along the coast. Later still, Masaniello came in ; he had fought hard for his life, and was quite exhausted. We were now but three on the beach ; and it was so dark, that but for the fitful glare of the lightning we

could have seen nothing. The two women, Carola and Baldovinetta, clung to each other, and I stood by them. Santa Maria! it was a fearful night! All through those long hours we kept the church-bell ringing—I hoped it might be some help in guiding the boats. About twelve o'clock we heard a loud shout, which resounded even through the roar of the thunder, and a flash of lightning showed us a little boat, tossed like a nut-shell from wave to wave, but coming steadily onward. It was hard to bear the long pauses of complete darkness in that terrible suspense, and I could only help by kneeling and praying aloud. At last there came a crash on the shingle, a cry of exultation, and Pietro and Baldovinetta were in each other's arms. Thanks be to God! thanks, thanks, oh Madre Santissima, he was saved!"

The priest paused in his narrative, and I could scarcely control my impatience. To my surprise, he suddenly turned to me again and said, "Vossignoria is quite certain about what

the doctors said ?—there can be no mistake ?—other doctors would have said the same ?” “ Quite certain,” I repeated—I fear somewhat impatiently. “ It was a fool’s errand from the first ; the case is absolutely an incurable one. But finish, I beg of you, finish your story.”

The priest looked at me wistfully—“ Alas ! ” he said, “ there is, then, no doubt that it could not be cured ? But pardon, a thousand pardons ! you wish me to continue. Well, all night long Carola and I waited on the beach ; she seated herself on the ground, clasping her hands round her knees, and watching in agony. About two o’clock the storm began to abate, and the clouds broke ; a wild moon broke out, and shone fitfully on the boiling waves. The moon grew paler, and the first sign of dawn began to streak the heavens ; the wind sank to a hollow moaning murmur, and we sat on, waiting and watching. Maria Santissima ! it was fearful ! As the light increased, I could see Carola’s face—it was like that of the dead ;

she could scarcely speak—her voice sounded faint and far off.

“As the morning drew slowly on, it became bitterly cold ; and, worn out and drenched as she was, I tried to persuade Carola to go indoors, but she would not ; she sat rocking herself backwards and forwards, and moaning. At last—and how long it was it is difficult to tell—I heard a sound from the sea as of singing, the strange wild singing of something that was rather a sound than a song ! Carola shuddered violently, and grasped my arm, ‘What is that ?’ she cried ; ‘Santa Madonna ! what can that be ?’ I know not why, but an indescribable horror seemed to seize on me also. ‘It is nothing, Carola—nothing at all,’ I kept saying. We, however, strained our eyes through the gloom, and, oh heaven ! we saw a boat coming towards us, at one time riding on the waves, at another disappearing in the deep trough ! Heaven help me, I cannot think of it now ! It was washed in to our very feet ;

and Giannetto, our Giannetto, stood safe and in life before us ! Signor Conte, Signore, you shall not say—you cannot say—it was incurable ! His tongue was loosened. I repeat, it could not have been incurable—for he spake plain !”

The perspiration stood like beads on the brow of the priest, and he grasped my arm—
“What do you think of it ? Answer ! say—will you not tell me what you think of it ?”

What could I say ? I never was so astonished in my life. I could only repeat, “Cured, you say ? cured ?”

“Yes, yes, cured—why not ? I repeat, why not ? Nobody can say a thing is incurable !”

“It is wonderful, marvellous ! And Giannetto, he is happy ? he is enraptured ? grateful ?”

“Alas !” answered the priest, loosening his hold on my arm, and sinking back in his chair, “a very strange and fearful change has come over Giannetto. The day after our wonderful

deliverance, I held a thanksgiving service. I had services all day long. My parishioners flocked into the church—they knelt all day ; all were there, from Masaniello down to Tonino, Pietro's youngest child. Giannetto alone was missing. I went in search of him ; I pointed out to him that, of all, he was the one from whom most thanks were due. He refused ; he turned on his heel with a scornful gesture ; nothing would induce him to enter the church. Not a word of thanksgiving has he offered since, nor would he listen to counsel from myself. The neighbours who had mocked him before now shunned and avoided him, and even Carola grew terrified. It is now a week that he has been gone ; he kissed his mother coldly, as if all love for her was dead in his heart ; he passed Pietro in the street with a low-breathed curse ; and we have neither seen nor heard of him since. God forgive him ! terrible fears haunt me at times that all is not with him as it should be—that God has for a while forgotten

him, or given him over to the powers of evil. But, for pity's sake, do not repeat that the doctors said that it was incurable ; it could not be that it was incurable. Giannetto, my son, my son ! rather had I seen thee washed dead to my feet than have lived to hear thee forswear the God that made thee ! ”

I was horrified by the strange words of the priest ; the more I thought of it, the more it puzzled me.

“Then Giannetto gave no account of the manner in which he recovered his speech ? no explanation whatever ? ”

“None. He absolutely refused to answer any questions ; it was his own affair, he said. Poor Carola ! At first her joy was very great, but it was soon dashed to the ground ; for Giannetto was no longer the dutiful and tender son she had loved so well. I cannot, cannot understand it. I try not to think about it, for it makes me hard and bitter towards Pietro and his friends. I cannot help fearing that it

is to a great degree owing to their cruel taunts that he has been tempted into something wild and accursed."

It was indeed a strange story, and left me with an uneasy feeling—a vain wish that my own part in the tragedy had been left unplayed. I left money with the priest, who was very grateful, for times were no longer so prosperous at San Jacopo as they had been ; and I returned to Nice sad and bewildered.

CHAPTER IV.

FIVE or six years passed in England of a busy life had almost effaced any recollection of Giannetto from my mind ; or, I should perhaps say, had reduced the whole strange story to a sort of dream.

Amy was married ; Helen had quite recovered her health ; and nothing had occurred to cause our return to Nice, when we suddenly made up our minds to go to Italy for the winter, for the pleasure of the change. For a long time I hesitated between Rome and Florence, finally deciding in favour of the latter, as being the best for masters for Helen. We at first thought of going by the Riviera route, in order to revisit our old haunts ; but hearing

that we were likely to be delayed by the badness of the roads, we changed our minds, and crossed Mont Cenis, taking our way straight to Florence. Some friends had already secured us a villa half-way up to Fiesole, and there we took up our abode.

Those who know Florence as it is now can scarcely realise what it used to be before the innumerable changes and innovations, especially on the side of Fiesole. It is sad to miss those grand old walls, throwing their deep cool shadows over the houses ; and your recollections are confounded by finding yourself wandering in streets and squares, where in former days the country, as it were, kissed the town.

Our villa was lovely. About half-way up the ascent to Fiesole you come upon a little village, grouped picturesquely round its church, San Domenico by name. The road leading up to it is bordered by cypress hedges ; and here, as one walks, one invariably finds a small flock

of lean, bearded goats stretching their almost unnaturally long bodies to crop the uppermost shoots. Before reaching the church, you turn to the right down a rather steep lane, and about a quarter of a mile brings you to the gate of our villa.

The view over the Val d'Arno was a constant source of delight to us ; for hours we sat on the terrace outside our windows sketching, impatient at the impossibility of transferring to paper those soft and delicate tints. I have heard some people complain of the sameness of Florentine colouring, and it is possible that it may be so ; but the sameness is inexpressibly beautiful, the cool grey of the dusky olive-trees giving the tone to the whole country. Every evening the setting sun flooded the valley, till it seemed to float in lilac and crimson ; and far away on the clear horizon, faintly shadowed out, you have the broken lines of the Carrara mountains. That was the hour for hopelessly throwing brush and

easel aside, and drinking in the scene with an ecstasy one seldom knows out of Italy: it fades, it passes away, that wondrous glow; and far and near, from the great bells of the Duomo in the plain, to the faint tinkling sound from the convent high above us on the heights of Fiesole, comes the summons to prayer, and every peasant removes his hat, and lays down his tools, to cross himself and mutter an "Ave Maria."

We led a quiet, uneventful life that winter. Every morning Helen drove down into Florence to her lessons, or had masters at the villa; and we sometimes spent the rest of the day sight-seeing in the town, or wandering in the country round.

One day Beppo came into my room, flourishing a paper wildly in his hand. "Signor Conte, Signor Conte!" he shouted, "mad that I am, I forgot to show you this; and now it will be too late to take tickets. It was that cook; he has been worrying again with his eternal

demands for more cognac for his puddings ! Little enough of it goes into our dining-room, I tell him. And I forgot to show the Signor Conte this"—and he began reading in a loud voice, "'For two nights only. The famous *primo tenore*, Signor Giovanni.' And the Signore has never heard him? What a chance!—and thrown away owing to that *maledetto* cook."

"What is it, Beppo? who is he?"

"Who is he? What! has not the Signore heard of the new tenor, the singer who has made such a *furor* in Russia, and who has now come to sing for the first time in Italy, though he is an Italian born and bred?"

"I have heard of him, papa," cried Helen, "and I should so much like to hear him. My master gave him some lessons two years ago, and he says that he is the most magnificent *tenore di forza* he ever heard in his life."

"True, it is quite true, Signorina. It is said that when you have heard him sing, you

can listen to no one else. And he has studied both at the Scala and in Russia. But speak only, and I fly to see whether it is too late to secure places. The Grand Duke himself is to be there."

I gave Beppo permission, and he darted off. Alas! it was too late; every seat was taken in the Pergola theatre. Helen was much disappointed, but she insisted upon my walking down on the chance of being able to get in, to stand at least for a quarter of an hour, and report whether the new tenor was really as great a singer as he was supposed to be. In vain I assured her that wherever we might go, these great singers were sure to appear in time, in all probability in London, the very next season. She insisted, and—prevailed.

It was such a fine, cold, frosty evening, that I enjoyed the walk down to Florence very much. I went rather late to the opera-house, and found, as I had expected, not a single vacant seat—some, indeed, had been doubly

let for half the night to each person. Just, however, as I was turning away, the box-keeper called me back. "Look you, Signore," he said; "there is a little space—a *very* little space—within the door, where I have not yet put a chair. Would the Signore mind having a stool—a *very* little stool—put in there for him to sit on? He will not see very well, but, after all, one comes to hear these things, not to see." At this moment a burst of applause, loud and long, resounded through the house; and, my curiosity vividly excited, I accepted the offer of the box-keeper, and seated myself on the stool—the truly "very little stool"—he provided for me.

Every one knows how critical is a Florentine audience—how unforgiving if time and tune are not perfect—how chary of their applause, how lavish of their hisses; but to-night the whole house was carried away by its enthusiasm.

The piece was 'Lucrezia Borgia;' and as I

came in, Giovanni was singing “Di pescator ignobile.” It was the most lovely voice I could have imagined—round, and full, and sweet—evidently having reached its full perfection; the style also was highly finished; there was no rawness, no want of study,—all that art, combined with the rarest natural gifts, could do, made the new tenor’s singing the most beautiful thing I could have dreamt of.

The time passed only too quickly, and the first two acts were over before I began to look about me. At this moment the head of the box-keeper was suddenly thrust in at the door, and he broke in abruptly on my meditations.

“Signore, Signore Inglese! will he look at that box at the end?—no, not that one—the stage-box. Does he see a lady there—a young lady, with an old lady beside her? That is Signora Giovanni, the wife of the *primo tenore*. Beautiful, is she not? And that is her mother, Signora Celeste. They have taken that box for both nights—they

say she always goes to hear her husband sing ; and she waits in the carriage for him to come out when it is over."

"Is she an Italian?" I asked.

"Italian? Most certainly. She is Florentine; her father is an *impiegato*; he holds office under the Government—a man of position here, the Cavaliere Mattei; and it was thought a poor marriage for one of his daughters, when, two years ago, she took an opera-singer as her husband. But, *Cospetto!* she is likely to be the richest of the family."

The man withdrew his head as abruptly as it had been protruded, and, with enhanced curiosity, I raised my glass to look at the occupants of the stage-box.

Signora Celeste was what most Italian women become after a certain age, singularly ugly and haggard, a perfect foil to her daughter who sat beside her. Signora Giovanni could not have been more than eighteen or nineteen at that time, but she looked older.

The contour of her face was perfect, her eyes very large, and so dark, that they made the clear olive complexion yet paler by the contrast. She was dressed in black, and wore the heavy masses of her hair turned back from her brow, after the fashion of almost all Florentine women. But I was even more charmed by the extreme sweetness of her expression than by her beauty, which was very considerable.


Giovanni was ill supported on the stage. Binda, the bass, was a loud and rather rough singer; the *prima donna* sang well, though her voice was past its prime; and the contralto was mediocre: but the public had only eyes and ears for him, and good-naturedly ignored their shortcomings. Giovanni was a fine-looking man, and apparently made no use of the paints and artificial helps to good-looks generally supposed to be indispensable on the stage.

While I was looking at him, it suddenly occurred to me that somehow—somewhere—I

had seen him before, and I could not get rid of the impression. So strong was it, that I determined to wait outside after the performance for the chance of seeing him in plain clothes, and satisfying my curiosity.

The piece ended, and the people flocked out. I stood in the lobby, idly watching them as they passed, and listening to their remarks. The crowd gave way a little, and Signora Celeste and her daughter passed through and entered their carriage, which drove off a little way, and then stopped (as the box-keeper had told me) to wait for Giovanni.

At last the whole audience had slowly dispersed, and I began to think myself a fool, and prepared to start homewards, when I heard voices behind me, and the *prima donna's* carriage was called for. She came sweeping forward, her scarlet *bourous* thrown over one shoulder. "Bravo, Signor Giovanni!" she said as she passed, glancing back at the rest of the singers who were following her.



Giovanni bowed gravely.

“Corpo di Bacco, what bitter cold!” muttered Binda, as he took Giovanni’s arm and drew his cloak round him. The truth flashed across me, and suddenly, without thinking, I exclaimed aloud, “Giannetto!” The great tenor started violently and looked round at me. He made, however, no sign of recognition, but walked on down the street with his companions. I heard Binda’s deep voice—“Good night, my friend,” and Giovanni’s short answer, “The same to you;” and then, concluding that I was mistaken, and had been deceived by a casual resemblance, I lit a cigar, and turned towards Fiesole.

I heard swift steps behind me, and felt my hands grasped suddenly. “Signore, Signor Conte! is it really you?”


“Then it is Giannetto!” I exclaimed; “will wonders never cease?”

“Hush, hush!” said the tenor, looking uneasily round him, and especially at the car-

riage, which still waited a little way down the street. "The Signore will understand—circumstances alter. There are times when it is best not to remember too much—he has understood?"

"I understand," I answered rather sadly. "But, Signor Giovanni, come and see me at home; I should like to see you again where we can converse more easily." "Willingly, most willingly," he answered. I gave him my address; and, grasping my hand cordially, he left me. I watched his slight active figure as he went down the street, jumped into the carriage, and drove off; and, hardly believing that I could be in my right senses, I returned home.

The next morning I told Helen what had happened. She was astonished beyond measure. We tried once more to get seats in the opera-house for Giovanni's last performance, but did not succeed, much to her disappointment.



When three or four days had passed without my hearing or seeing anything of Giannetto, I began to think that he wished to avoid me. I heard of him everywhere in Florence, received and courted in society, and very popular. His wife went with him, and was in the habit of accompanying him on the pianoforte when he vouchsafed to sing in a private house—a favour but seldom conferred.

One day, however, towards the end of the week, a little open fly drove up to the door; and Beppo, in a slightly awe-struck voice, announced Signor Giovanni.

I looked at Beppo, and saw that he felt very much puzzled. I fancied he had recognised Giannetto, and hastily sent Helen after him to warn him not to say a word to his fellow-servants till I had had time to speak to him.

I motioned to Giannetto to seat himself, which he did so much with the air of a gentleman and equal, that I was more and more astonished.

"I must apologise, Signor Conte," he began, "for not having sooner availed myself of your permission to call upon you ; but you are doubtless aware that a man in my position has engagements he cannot escape from—and I study much still, for I have had to combat with a certain inflexibility of voice, which at last begins to yield."

"Inflexibility!" I exclaimed; "surely——"

He smiled. "I am rejoiced that you did not remark it."

At the risk of being thought inquisitive, and possibly impertinent, I could not help saying, "Giannetto, ever since I first saw you, I have felt the deepest interest in your career ; would it annoy you were I to ask how you attained your present position—in short, what your history has been since you left San Jacopo?"

"Signor Conte," he answered, "you have but to command—I will tell you."

"First," I began hesitatingly—"believe me, it is not idle curiosity that prompts my ques-

tion—can you not tell me in what manner your voice was restored ?”

He made a haughty and impatient movement, and the red blood mounted into his face, dyeing it to the very roots of his hair.


I saw I had gone too far. “I ask a thousand pardons,” I began; but he cut me short. “It is unnecessary,” he said. “The Signor Conte has a right to ask what he pleases. I must also reserve to myself the option of answering or remaining silent as I think necessary, and on this sole point I cannot satisfy him.

“When I left San Jacopo I had but a few *lire* in my pocket. They were, however, enough to enable me to get to Turin, walking all the way. I was at first almost starved; but I kept up heart, learnt one or two of the popular songs of the year, and sang them in the *cafés* of the poor people for a few *soldi* at a time. The Signor Conte has heard my voice—it was as good then as it is now, though, certainly, it was quite un-

cultivated. It gained me a small reputation, which spread rapidly.

“At last, one day I was sent for by an American gentleman, who had heard of me through his servants. Who or what he was I know not ; he was a certain Smit of Boston. He made me sing to him, and then offered to pay for a musical education for me, at Milan, at Florence—in short, wherever I would—provided that I would bind myself ten years to pay him the half of all I should gain from the time when my education should be completed. I asked for time to consider his proposal, and consulted a certain Nicolini, a music-seller, with whom I had made a sort of acquaintance. He strongly advised me to refuse, which I did, though it was much against my own inclination.

“The American left Turin. I then offered myself at the opera as a chorus-singer, and in that way earned enough to get through the year. At last, to my astonishment, the manager of the theatre offered to pay for my education



if I would undertake to sing in his theatre for three months a-year for five years, after I became a singer.

“ I again consulted Nicolini, who this time advised me to accept. I chose the Scala by his advice, and studied hard, supporting myself meanwhile as I best could. Vossignoria knows that I can write, thanks to the priest of San Jacopo ; and I taught myself to copy music, and was much employed by musicians as a copyist. But it was difficult to support myself at that time.

“ I used to copy music a good deal for the Cavaliere Mattei, a political agent of the Grand Duke of Tuscany at Milan.

“ The Cavaliere was a great *dilettante*, passionately fond of music, and a violinist himself. When he found out how very poor I was, he helped me with both money and good advice. Ah ! he has a good heart, that Filippo Mattei ! He allowed me also to consort with his family ; his wife, Signora Celeste, was kind-

ness itself, and many a word of encouragement she has spoken to me since I first made acquaintance with her. The children—there were four—became my friends. The eldest of them, Elvira, was then still a child ; she was fourteen years old, but she was so good, so dear, that even then I began to hope that at some future time her father might give her to me. I never concealed my birth,” he continued, proudly ; “they all know that I was but a poor fisherman. But more than that I have not told, and none can say that I have done an injustice. But patience ! do I not weary the Signore ? It is too good of him to be thus interested.”

“No, no ; pray, Giannetto, go on.”

“Well, my education was completed—that is to say, the Scala pronounced it completed—within a year ; and I returned to Turin, and sang there for the first time in public, with a certain success. The manager was generous ; he allowed me a good half of the three months’

gains, and by his recommendations enabled me to obtain a first-rate engagement at the Court of St Petersburg for two years. After I had been there awhile, I made much money—a real fortune ; and I wrote to the manager asking him for what sum he would release me from my engagement. He named a very large one. But I paid it, every *soldo*, and rejoiced in feeling that I was once more my own master.

“Two years ago I came to Florence, having obtained a short holiday. I found the Mattei returned here. Elvira was not yet betrothed ; she was seventeen, beautiful as an angel, and good as she was beautiful. I hardly dared ask Mattei, but he gave a free consent ; and my Elvira accompanied me back to St Petersburg as my wife. I am happy, Signor Conte ; do you not look on me as the happiest and luckiest of men ? ”

He laughed a curious little grating laugh.

I looked at him hesitatingly, and then said, “ And, Giannetto, can you tell me nothing

of the mother—of Carola ? She must be getting old now, and feeling lonely—a widow, bereaved also of her child.”

He answered hastily, “ She is very well ; I occasionally hear of her from the Curato’ of our village. She is a great lady now,” he added, smiling, “ and need do no work but for her own pleasure ; but I hear that she still lives in the little old house.”

“ And the Curato, he also is well ? ”

“ Yes, yes, quite well—that is, I believe so ; but I have not been there myself, and he is the only man in the miserable little place that can read and write, and he is not a man to say much about himself.”

He spoke irritably, and I could well see that he disliked all allusion to his former condition.

Again I felt tempted to apologise, when a feeling of indignation cut me short. What right had he to feel like this towards his best and earliest friend ? and, but for curiosity, I

should hardly have prolonged the conversation. In spite of myself, there was a fascination about him, or rather in connection with his history, which I could not resist.

When he next spoke it was in a very different manner—"May I ask the Signor Conte if the young ladies are well? Are they settled in life, or still with you?" And on hearing that Helen was still with me, he said, rather doubtfully, "I scarcely dare to ask it; but if you permitted it, might I present my wife to you and to the Signorina Helen? She would esteem it a great honour, and dies already to kiss your hands, for I have told her that I lie under great obligations to you?"

"Indeed," I interrupted hastily, "I must disclaim all gratitude from you. I have often regretted——" I stopped abruptly, for the dark flush once more rose almost painfully into Giannetto's face. He bowed gravely and said, "I must hope, Signor Conte, that my future career will give you no reason to regret

having been the first to awaken my ambition. Will you consent to my request?"

I told him that Helen and I would call and pay our respects to his wife, and asked for his address.

"We are at present staying with the Mattei, No. 12 Borgo Pinti," he answered. "And the Signora Celeste will feel much gratified at the honour you will confer upon her, in visiting Elvira at her house. And now, Signore, I relieve you of my presence." He rose and took up his hat. "I have the honour to wish you good morning."

And bowing low, he took his leave in the same gentlemanlike manner with which he had entered.

CHAPTER V.

HELEN and I called at the Palazzo where the Mattei family were living a very few days after Giannetto's visit.

Up a long, carpetless stair we climbed, and arrived at an iron grate on the third floor, where we pulled, or rather shook, a dilapidated bell. For a long time no one came; then the face of a housemaid looked through the opposite door, and a shrill voice shouted the usual Italian question, "Chi è?"

"Is the Signora Mattei in the house?" inquired Beppo, in reply. "Of course she is, at this hour," answered the woman; and drawing a key out of her pocket, she proceeded slowly to open the grate.

Beppo gave her my card, and she hurried away with it, leaving us standing on the landing-place. After a few moments she returned, and saying, "Enter, enter, Signore!" she led the way through a large empty ante-room into what was evidently used as a music-room.

It was a large room, the centre occupied by a grand piano, on the extremity of which lay masses of music, songs, accompaniments, and what looked like manuscript violin-music. Round the room were long, red-covered seats or divans. The walls were painted a pale-buff colour, and the curtains matched them in hue. Two or three tables stood at one end of the room, and on these were carefully arranged various trifling ornaments, such as photographs in cases, Paris *bonbonnières*, bits of Florentine mosaic, &c. &c.

Bidding us be seated, the servant fidgeted about the room a little, and then said, "Vossignori are foreigners?" Much amused,

I told her we were English. "Ah!" she said, "doubtless the Signori have come a long, long way. La Signora Mattei dearly loves the English. She once, years ago, knew an English lady, and stayed two days——" She broke off; for a shrill voice shouted from the inner room, "Violante! O Violante!" "I come, I come!" she cried; and making a sort of deprecating shrug at me, as much as to say, "You see we can have no more conversation just now," she hurried out of the room.

We again waited some moments; then a door on the opposite side of the room opened, and a gentle, venerable old gentleman came forward. "S'accomodino—be seated, I beg," he began; "these Signori do us too much honour to call on us—on my daughter, I should rather say. La Signora Mattei is a woman of much spirit; she is busy at this hour, but she will be here directly." He was a fine-looking old man, with long, silky, white

hair, and a very sweet, courteous expression, particularly when he smiled. His hands were covered with brown cloth mittens ; and occasionally he kept up the old custom of slowly fumbling in his pocket for a large tortoise-shell snuff-box, which he made use of with much zest.

“I hope,” he continued, “that the Signorina diverts herself in Florence ? There is much that is interesting if she has a love of art. Perhaps she is herself an amateur, and occasionally studies in our galleries ?”

I told him that we were staying at Florence much for purposes of study, and then proceeded to make him my compliments on the reputation of his son-in-law.

He bowed, laying his hand on his heart. “The Signor Conte is too good. Without doubt, Giovanni has talent ; he will be a great singer. I tell him he should go to England. I was there myself once—it is now twenty years—and I know London well. Yes, yes ;

it is there he would make a fortune. They know nothing of our language, those English,—the Signor Conte is *Scozzese*—he speaks like a native,—but they appreciate the talent, and they pay well. I myself heard the Pasta sing, and heard the English say, ‘Beautiful, beautiful! but what did she sing?—was it not German, or was it French?’ Still, not the less do they pay well.”

“I hope Signor Giovanni will come to England,” said Helen, rather timidly; “at least he will find better support there in the theatre, for all the best artists find their way to London.”

“Ah, it is a wonderful place!” continued the Cavaliere Mattei. “Without doubt, Florence appears very small to you; and my son-in-law tells me that St Petersburg——”

He was interrupted by the door flying open, and the abrupt entrance of Signora Celeste, followed by her daughter. It was as if a whirlwind had burst into the room. “Good morn-

ing, Signor Conte. Signorina Elena, I have the honour to salute you. I hope I see you in good health. It grieved me to hear from my son-in-law that you are not strong. Be seated. We have heard much of you from Giovanni. He tells me," she continued, without taking breath, "that he made acquaintance with you some years ago at Nice, and that he lies under obligations to you. We are grateful," she added ; "you do us great honour in visiting us thus, and the opportunity of offering you our thanks we shall hold very dear."

I endeavoured to disclaim all thanks, but she did not pause.

"And the Signorina, does she divert herself in Florence ? I fear but little goes on at this moment. She has without doubt visited the Cascine every Sunday afternoon ? The Grand Duchess is almost always there, and it is very gay. Do the Signori contemplate being here for the Carnival ? There are to be great doings this year ; and certain Signori of the principal

families are to have balls. The Signorina without doubt loves dancing? She is of an age to do so. Elvira loved it much formerly; but since she is married she is quite changed,—she thinks of nothing but her husband and child, and the music. Really, it is a trial of patience—a weariness—when she and her father and Giovanni begin with their everlasting music. Not a word can one get in. And what with the violin and the pianoforte, and now Binda, now La Caprera, coming in to practise with Giovanni, life is a burden. The people in the streets come under the windows to listen, but I hope I may have put a stop to that; for when they are all listening, Violante and I are often obliged to throw water and vegetables out of the window. Can I help it?—bah! one must keep one's house clean!”

“Assuredly,” said the Cavaliere, mildly. “But wherefore thus outrage their feelings? Poor souls! it is to them a great diversion.”

She quietly ignored his words. "And the Signor Conte has taken the Villa Vacchini?" she continued. "La Signora Vacchini is one in a thousand! an excellent person; she is much my friend. Without doubt, it is her agent Signor Ettore Bonifazio who has arranged with these Signori? He is a good man; but, Santa Maria! what fat! he is a hill—a mountain! La Vacchini at one time had it in her mind to marry him; but I said to her, 'Lucia, my dear, beware; it is a sack—a mountain—you would marry. An agitation—a slight fright—he is seized with an apoplexy, and you are again a widow!' Had I not reason? And she is in good circumstances. She has a large hotel in the Piazza Nuova, which foreigners frequent much; and she has also the Villa Vacchini, and certain olive and vine yards in the hills near the Certosa. I hope," she continued, suddenly breaking off, "that you remain satisfied that she does well by you?"

"Perfectly," I answered. "All I have had

to ask for has been done excellently by Signor Bonifazio."

"I rejoice to hear it; for if it had not been so, I would have said to her, 'Lucia, it is a shame, a wickedness, that you have not attended better to these foreigners that are so kind and so good.' My second daughter L'Adelaide is betrothed to her eldest son; he wanted Elvira, but even at that time, when Giovanni was in Russia, I could see that her heart——"

"Mamma, for pity's sake," broke in the sweet voice of Giovanni's wife, the first words I had heard her speak. My attention had been fully occupied by the mother, while Helen had been equally busily engaged in extracting gentle monosyllables from Elvira.

The young wife looked very pretty and very shy, but there was somewhat of an air of sadness about her that troubled me. She had not that quiet look of repose which speaks of a heart at rest. Her large eyes looked anxious, and even care-worn; and when she was not

smiling, her face assumed a gravity unnatural in one so young. It brightened up prettily when Helen asked to see the baby, and she brought it into the room. It was a pretty, brown, Italian baby, with large soft eyes and abundance of dark hair ; and Elvira evidently loved it with all the fervour of her southern nature.

“It is a little angel, a darling !” said the old Cavaliere, tenderly patting its little head. “And the Signor Conte, has he also little grandchildren ? The English children are beautiful !”

I told him that my daughter Amy had two little ones—the youngest might be about the age of Elvira’s. Elvira looked pleased and interested, and I heard her begin to question Helen in a low voice about the English children.

Signora Celeste turned to me again—“It is curious,” she said, “but it is said that English children live upon milk. I suppose, then, that they are very small and thin, and

have not much strength till they get older? Elvira would never have reared that child upon milk. But doubtless it is not true."

I answered her that it was quite true.

"Indeed!" she said; "would you believe it! And you mean to say that you never give them wine at all? What support can they have?"

I could only repeat that the children were very healthy and blooming. She evidently looked on my saying so as the ignorant assertion of a man.

It was some time before we could get away—there was so much to be said on Signora Mattei's part. Altogether, for a first visit, it was an unusually long one.

"Well, Helen, and what do you think of Giannetto's pretty wife?" I asked, as soon as we were seated in the carriage, and fairly started on our way home.

"Very pretty, very fascinating, but not clever, I should think; and, papa, did you

notice how very sad she looks ? I hope he is kind to her."

"She does indeed look sad, poor little thing ! I was especially charmed with the old Cavaliere. What a thorough gentleman of the old school he is, with his white hair and his gentle venerable face !"

Before very long our visit was returned by the ladies of the party. We were sitting out on the terrace,—Helen putting the finishing touches to a drawing she had been making of a great bunch of yellow *nespoli*, or medlars ; I myself lazily smoking, and reading a very stupid Italian novel,—when Beppo announced them. More chairs were brought out, and we reseated ourselves.

After a few moments of general conversation, Signora Celeste leant forward and said in a very loud whisper, "Signor Conte, with your leave, will you do me the great honour of permitting me a little conversation with you in private ?"

I could see Elvira colour violently, and give an imploring look to her mother; but that good lady was not to be suppressed by looks. I could not imagine what she could want, but politeness compelled me to bow, and lead the way into the house. She followed, sweeping along in a silk gown, which I could not help thinking made more rustle than any gown I had ever seen, or rather heard, before. I had an uncomfortable feeling that she was very close at my heels—a feeling increased by the sharp way in which she shut the door behind her with a click, and established herself on a tall old-fashioned arm-chair in front of me.

She began the conversation herself. “And now, Signor Conte,” she said, “I shall be greatly obliged to you if you will have the kindness to tell me what you know of the former habits and pursuits of my son-in-law. It is not merely from curiosity that I ask,” she added, seeing my natural hesitation;

“but if the Signor Conte is able to tell me, it concerns me to know.”

“It is, I fear, but little that I can tell you, Signora Mattei,” I answered. “My acquaintance with Signor Giovanni was very slight, and of short duration. You are, he tells me, aware that his birth is not equal——”

“Yes, yes, I know that,” she exclaimed. “He was but a peasant, a fisherman; is it not so?”

“You are right; and it was through a conversation with the priest of his village that I first became interested in him. He was very handsome, and—and I am an admirer of beauty. I was enabled to do him some slight service, which he makes too much of by far; and there our acquaintance for the time came to an end. It is an unexpected honour,” I resumed, at my wits’ end what to say, “that I have renewed it so advantageously.”

Signora Celeste appeared to be thinking deeply, and not to remark my little speech,

which was meant to be complimentary. She spoke again, with an abruptness which made me feel as if I was being snapped at. "And this Curato, was he a friend of Giovanni's?"

"He was very good to him," I answered. "The father was dead, and the priest not only helped his mother with money out of his own very small store, but he also gave him an education which made him superior to his fellows."

"And his voice? Did the priest also teach him to sing?"

"His voice, his voice," I stammered; "it developed late in life—unusually late. No; the priest had nothing to do with training that."

"Then he never sang in the choir?" she asked.

"Not to my knowledge," I replied, wishing her anywhere—at the bottom of the Red Sea.

"And is his mother alive?"

"She is—that is, I believe so; but it is so

long since I have been at San Jacopo, that the Signora will comprehend that I can give no exact answer to her question."

Signora Celeste suddenly rose, drew her chair closer to mine, and folding her hands (clothed in black net mittens) together, she fixed her eyes upon me, and proceeded : "Signor Conte, I am afraid you have indeed but little to tell me : but I will explain to you the reason of my question ; for, without doubt, you consider me indiscreet and impertinent—nay, it is but natural that I should so appear to you."

Of course I endeavoured to disavow the supposition ; but she interrupted my attempted civilities ruthlessly. "Listen, Signor," she said—"listen. Giovanni has no doubt told you that he came first under my husband's notice as a copyist who was working out his musical education at Milan. At that time we resided much at Milan. My mother was alive, and a great invalid ; so we spent months with her at

a time. My husband had not then obtained his present appointment at Florence. The Signor Conte knows that the Cavaliere is a great *dilettante*, has a veritable passion for music; and where there is a music-seller's shop, there he is to be found, at times, for hours in the day. Well, he had at that time a fanaticism for very ancient music, forgotten altogether at this present time, and much of this he had transposed for the violin. It is difficult, this old music, and has to be understood, or the transposing makes it often almost ludicrous. My husband found that Giovanni could do it well, and employed him constantly. The poor boy was at that time so destitute, that I could see that very often he had not enough to buy a good meal; so it ended in our taking him into the house.

“My mother, poor soul, took a great fancy for Giovanni, and would have it that he was to be one of the greatest singers of the day; and it is certain that his voice was of a beauty,

a quality, that one does not meet with often.

“The only times he would never spend with us were his Sundays and his saints’ days. On such days, when friends and neighbours meet, going and coming from the churches, he would never consent to be with our family party. At first, when I asked him, he would not say where he went, but latterly he told me that he walked into the country to see some old friend of his mother’s, who was a Milanese ; so I remained satisfied. The Signore knows, I presume, that he obtained an engagement of much distinction, and left us for Russia ? By that time we had become so fond of him that it was a sorrow, a grief, to part from him ; and it was to us like the return of a dear son when he came home and asked the Cavaliere for Elvira.

“Elvira was not without suitors—several times I could have established her well in life ; but the poor child had a veritable little passion for Giovanni—and the Signor Conte can un-

derstand the feelings of a father. What could he do ? He consented. The day for the wedding was fixed ; but instead of looking happy, the bridegroom looked gloomier every day, and Elvira did nothing but cry. We could not imagine what was amiss. At last I compelled Elvira to tell me—Giovanni wished for a civil marriage without the blessing of the Church. Of course Elvira would not agree ; and the Cavaliere was very angry, and wished at the eleventh hour to stop it all. They are all alike, these men, with their impatience ! I told Elvira that I took it on myself. I sent for Giovanni. I asked him if he could give a clear and sufficient reason for his wish ; and he had nothing to say except that he disliked the ceremony, and other such frivolous pretexts, worthy of no consideration. I told him so. I asked him to talk it over with some priest ; but that he refused to do : and after a few more expostulations, he gave way. Signor Conte, there is something, I know not what, of mysterious about

him. When the moment came that the wedding procession should enter the church, he became pale as a corpse, the perspiration stood on his brow, he seemed as if in a mortal agony, and so it continued during the ceremony; and when he had to speak, it seemed to us all that his voice was gone—he mumbled his answers as if he knew not what he said; and at last, when all was over, he had to be supported out of the church more like a dead than a living man. Ah! we were much frightened; but the outer air seemed to revive him, and he became himself again. It was strange, unaccountable, was it not? I myself cannot understand it—for I never saw a malady at all resembling it; and, as a rule, his health is excellent—he knows not what it is to be ill.

“Now, alas!” she continued, “we find that Giovanni never enters the door of a church; he has never once confessed since his marriage, never says a prayer, and will not even use holy words, or sing songs addressed to

divine personages. Alas! it is this that makes my poor child so unhappy. He is very kind, kindness itself to her, except on this one subject—and on this he will hear nothing; and she, poor child, has always been a good Christian—a saint, I may say, in all her ways. He cannot even endure the sight of her crucifix, her little images, and sacred pictures; so she grieves much. In short, where the holy faith is concerned, and there only, he is utterly unlike his better self.


“When the child was born, she had hoped to dedicate it to the blessed Mother, and call it Maria; but he would not have it so named, and had it baptised Felicità—a name of good omen, he said. There is a small saint of the name, a Santa Stravagante, without a fixed day in the calendar, which made us give our consent. But, Signore,” she continued, rising, “I have trespassed long upon your time. I had hoped,” she added, sadly, “that you would have been able to help us—to tell us

something that would account for this strange evil in Giovanni ; but I see that you can tell me no more than we know ourselves. A thousand thanks for the kind interest you have shown in what I have ventured to tell you ; and I must beg many pardons for having thus taken up your time."

While this conversation was going on, Helen had been growing much interested in her companion, whom she found more intelligent than she had expected.

Elvira told her a good deal about their life in Russia, and Russian ways and customs. She spoke of her husband's success with much pride, and detailed many of the compliments and favours showered on him at St Petersburg. Helen was amused, and thought the time had passed only too quickly when Signora Mattei returned ; and they took their leave with the usual compliments.

To myself, the time had not seemed so short. The whole conversation had been



painful to me, from the consciousness of having something to conceal. I told Helen what had passed. She grieved for the poor little wife. "I am sure she feels it dreadfully," she said. "She looks to me as if she had cried till she could cry no more—and no wonder! But it seems to me curious that she should not have thought of all this before she married him." "I thought so at first," I answered; "but consider, these Italian women know little or nothing of the men they are destined to marry, and are never by any chance allowed to hold conversation with them alone; so that I do not think it so wonderful. Besides, in this case the only thing she had had to startle her was his wish to have a civil marriage only; and that point, we know, he yielded." Helen sighed, "Poor little thing! poor Elvira!"

CHAPTER VI.

GIANNETTO and his wife called on us once more, when unfortunately we were out, leaving highly-glazed cards, after the Italian fashion, with P.P.C. in the corner. They went on to Venice, where he had accepted an engagement.

The Italian spring set in, and the cold weather passed away. Florence, as the year advanced, began to justify her beautiful flowery name ; tall tulips, crimson and white and yellow, countless purple and scarlet anemones, turned the olive and vine yards into carpets of wonderful brilliancy ; the scent of orange and lemon blossoms in the garden became almost overpowering ; and large magnolias slowly unfolded their wax-like leaves.

We used to return from our long drives in the cool of the evening, the carriage laden with flowers; at one time with irises, tulips, and roses—at another with myrtle and sweet-bay, and long branches of the purple Judas-tree, and orange-flowering arbutus. Helen revelled in them; and would turn our large, cool drawing-room into a perfect bower, much to the disgust of Beppo and some other of the Italian servants, who, like all their countrymen, dread sweet-scented flowers indoors, believing that they produce fevers and all sorts of harm.

We grudged every week as it passed; and the heat increased, warning us that the season was at hand in which Italy chooses to be left in peace with her children, and the foreigner must fly.

One evening we accomplished an expedition we had had in view for a long time—a drive to the top of Fiesole, to visit the Franciscan monastery.

The glare of the day was quite over, but

the heat was still very great when we started, and the ascent was slow in consequence. Up we toiled along the broad white road on its zigzag course, meeting few people by the way, now passing a group of peasants with their large white-haired dog or sprightly spitz, now being passed by a carriage making a spurt up the hill containing two or three Russian ladies and gentlemen, on their way, probably, to dine at Villa Mozzi ; then, as we rose higher, the Fiesole women crowded round us, begging us to buy their straw-plait work, long rolls of it beautifully twisted, and queer straw cocks and hens with long tails. Helen was very weak-minded, and bought right and left.

We reached the old Etruscan town, with its lovely church-tower, and watched a line of seminarists in their long black cassocks pass us and descend the hill from their home, diminishing in size as the distance increased, till it appeared like the twisting of a small black serpent far below.

We had brought some large heavy packages of coffee, sugar, and snuff, as a present to the friars ; and bidding Beppo follow with these, we took our way to the monastery.

We were received with a warm welcome by the Father Superior, who told us that it was a great treat to them to receive visitors, and was most attentive to us, showed us the chapel, and the various points from which the magnificent view was best to be seen, and even allowed Helen to peep into the *clausura*—the inner cloister, where no woman may tread.

He told us that most of his friars were absent on their special missions, and at that time not more than twelve in all were at home. "One of them," he said, "has just returned from our mother home at Assisi. The cholera was at Perugia, and a great panic prevailed, especially as two of the brethren had died, and they sent for some from here, to bring fresh hands to the work. They asked for a good preacher, and I sent our best, Fra Geronimo, and a

young brother, full of zeal, who had lately joined, Fra Martino. Alas ! Fra Geronimo returned alone ; the younger brother had finished his work, and obtained his crown of martyrdom. He is doubly blessed, having been buried near the shrine of the holy Francis himself ; but he was very young."

"Fra Geronimo !" I repeated. "Was it he who was at Nice some five or six years ago, preaching in the church of Santa Lucia ?"

"It is possible ; I cannot tell," was the answer of the Superior. "Our friars go far and wide. Yes, assuredly he has been at Nice often ; but when, I cannot tell. Perhaps the Vossignoria might like to ask him ?"

"I should, very much," I replied, eagerly.

The Superior beckoned to a lay brother, a pale, bowed-down-looking man—"Olà, Gian-Maria, when the Padre Geronimo enters, pray him to come to me."

Meanwhile Helen had taken out her drawing-book, and was sketching rapidly, seated on a

little rough step, a group of friars in their picturesque brown habit gathered round her, making their remarks aloud—"Look! look! there is old Pietro's cottage; how natural it is! What a wonderful talent! And there is old Mariuccia in her red apron! what a marvel! And a woman can do thus! Verily, who would believe it? Look! look! there is the black cat. Santa Maria! but it is wonderful!"

"The Signora is English?" asked one, rather timidly. "She is doubtless an artist?"

Helen told him that many English women sketched very well, entirely for their own pleasure.

"Indeed! truly it is wonderful! Who would have thought that women could do thus?" they repeated, much to her amusement.

Here the Superior offered her a pinch of snuff; and knowing that a refusal would hurt the kindly feelings of the fathers, she took it, and submitted to the frightful fit of sneezing which was the natural consequence, the friars

all saluting her, and wishing her *buona salute* and *felicità*, as she did so, after their courteous, old-fashioned custom.

They then begged her acceptance of various little treasures made of wax, manufactured by themselves, chiefly long coils for lighting candles, twisted in all sorts of fantastic shapes. Helen professed great admiration for them, much to their delight; and she promised to take some home to her little nieces, her sister's children. On hearing this, one of the monks quickly retreated into the monastery, and returned with a little paper parcel. "See, Signora!" he cried, "I have brought you something for the little children—see!" and with a flourish, he drew a wax bird from the paper, and triumphantly presented it. "See, it has eyes, black eyes, and can move its wings; but you will be very careful of it?"

Helen accepted the treasure with as much pleasure as it was given, and put it very carefully into her drawing-bag. Presently she

rose and came up to show me her sketch. While doing so, she suddenly caught hold of me—"Look, look, papa! what a picture!"

What so much attracted her attention was the appearance of two Franciscan monks slowly mounting the hill, in the taller of whom I at once recognised the Fra Geronimo who had so much excited our admiration by his preaching at Nice.

They formed, as she said, a very picturesque group. Fra Geronimo walked with a long and firm step, his noble head erect, and the fine proportions of his tall attenuated figure undisguised by his rough brown habit. His companion was a much older man, but appeared to be bowed by infirmity and care even more than by the weight of years; he walked with his eyes fixed on the ground, and his long grey beard reached down to the hempen cord which formed his girdle. Each carried a sack over his left shoulder, containing the gifts of charity that day received for the convent.

They parted at the foot of the chapel steps, the older Father going on to the cloister—the other, Fra Geronimo, obeying a sign from his Superior, and advancing to where we stood.

“Have you had good speed, brother Geronimo?” was the first question.

“We have walked far,” he answered, “and Fra Pietro is very weary; few asked him to rest in their houses. There is little charity abroad.”

The Superior looked rather wistfully at the sack, and did not answer. Fra Geronimo turned to me, and saluted me gravely.

There was a certain sternness and severity about the man. He gave me the impression of being uncompromising in everything—a face of singular power, of one who would grapple with sin in mid-career, and force shame and remorse on the most hardened sinner.

I asked him whether he recollected having been at Nice the year that we were there? He remembered it well; he had been there


for some months, preaching a great deal. A sudden idea struck me. I would tell Giannetto's whole history to this man, and ask him what he thought of it. The tall Friar was standing before me, calm and motionless, waiting for me to speak. Should I do harm in trusting him? I knew nothing of him. I raised my eyes, and scrutinised his face with care. As if conscious that much depended on that look, he bent his large hollow eyes on me for one moment; but in that moment all hesitation passed away, and I felt that the man who stood before me was indeed a fit instrument for God's will—pure in single-mindedness, strong as steel; and I determined to trust him implicitly.

It was now growing late, and knowing that I should scarcely have time for my long story then, I begged Fra Geronimo (if it should be possible) to visit me at the villa within a few days, as I had occasion to ask his advice. He told me that he would do so; and, calling

Helen, we took leave of our kind hosts, and started on our return home.

Merrily the horses trotted down, swinging the carriage round the zigzag corners, the sharp drag making the seats vibrate as we went. A few fire-flies were dancing about (though it was still early in the year for them), and now and then a glimmering spark from the ground revealed a glow-worm, almost emerald in its green light. Helen had a fancy that the glow-worms were the wives of the fire-flies, and insisted that it was true, and that the fire-flies were ill-conditioned, wild gallants, who left their estimable wives to mope at home by themselves. The grasshoppers made such a noise that, at one time, we could not help fancying that one must have got into the carriage.

We seemed to reach home only too soon—too soon, indeed, in sad earnest; for on the table lay a packet of letters, sent by express—a summons home on important business.



Alas ! how the few business-like explanatory words of my correspondent brought us down from the world of fire-flies and romance to the dull routine of everyday life ! Our happy holiday was at an end. Helen went up-stairs in a very disconsolate humour, and, some time after, confessed to me that she had cried herself to sleep.

During the few days that followed, we had so much to arrange and to think of, that I had almost forgotten my appointment with the Franciscan. The letters arrived on Friday, and the following Tuesday was the day fixed upon for our departure. On Monday evening our arrangements were completed, and we had time to sit down and rest, and look ruefully round our dismantled rooms. All the purchases we had made at Florence, which had served to beautify our pleasant villa, had been removed that afternoon, to be packed in Florence and sent off to England. There were two or three fine old gilded *cassoni* or chests,

carved chairs, large majolica pots, innumerable odds and ends, and, the greatest treasure of all, an exquisite little David, by Donatello, under a white marble baldacchino, standing about two feet high,—all were gone!—nothing but the original bare furniture remained. No wonder that we felt disconsolate.

It was beginning to grow rather late, when Beppo came in to say that a Franciscan wished to speak with me. I was very glad, having greatly feared that I should not see him again. He came in, and apologised for not having been able to come before.

“I have had much to do,” he said. “Much preaching also has fallen to my lot; and, alas! the flesh is weak. After preaching, I am often unable to do more.”

He seated himself, enveloping his hands in the loose sleeves of his habit, and bending his eyes to the ground. Helen had left the room, feeling that it might be easier for the friar to talk to me in her absence.

I began at once by telling him how and in what manner I had come across the village of San Jacopo, and had first been interested in the unhappy Giannetto. I told him of our coming to Nice together, and of the impression made on us all by his sermon on human suffering ; of the verdict of the doctors,—in short, all the whole strange story. He remembered the storm well, and had had much to do in helping and consoling the sufferers from the effects of it. When I told him of Giannetto's return, and the wonderful change wrought in him, he crossed himself repeatedly, and muttered something in Latin, too low for me to hear ; and he could scarcely conceal his astonishment under the usual perfect calm of his demeanour when I told him that this young fisherman, whose history I had been telling him, was no other than the famous tenor Giovanni, who had lately been making such a sensation in Florence.

“ And now, Father,” I concluded, “ tell me

what you think of this strange story. Is there, can there be any unnatural, or rather unhallowed, cause which has driven Giannetto from Church and God?"

"I know not," replied the friar; "strange and unaccountable things sometimes occur in nature. Signor Conte"—he lowered his voice almost to a whisper—"sometimes desperate men have been known to sell their souls."

It was evident that his suspicions pointed in the same direction as my own.

"Anyhow," he exclaimed, "there is a soul to be saved for God. I will, God give me grace, do my part. For yours, pray for me. God will give me the power, if it be His sacred will."

His large eyes flashed with a feverish, enthusiastic fire; and as he rose to his feet, and drew the hempen girdle round his loins, he looked like some prophet about to go forth inspired on his way.

"You go?" I asked, somehow feeling scarcely worthy to address him.

"I go to Venice. I follow him through the world. There is a soul to be saved for God!"

Awe-struck, I stood aside to let him pass; and he went straight out, only pausing on the threshold and raising his hand in the act of blessing. I watched him till a turn in the road hid him from my sight, and then, lost in thought and bewildered, returned into the house.

The next morning dawned, the day of our departure. Helen came down to breakfast in her travelling dress, and we both felt very sad. The carriage was announced, and we went out to it. All our cottage-friends were assembled under the long, broad portico: Pippo, the gardener, with an enormous stiff bouquet for Helen; Adele, his wife; Colomba, the wife of the *contadino*, who managed the vines and *podere*, or farm; and all the chil-

dren, also holding bouquets ; Carola, Anna, and the old father, the patriarch of them all ; and last, but not least, the villa watch-dogs, Giotto and Solferino.

It was a mingled scene of crying, and kissing of hands, and shouts of " A pleasant journey, a most happy journey ! " &c. We got away at last, and I thought our partings well over ; but at the station, as I slipped a last *scudo* into the coachman's hand, to my dismay he clasped mine to his lips, and burst into tears.

We were seated in the carriage, the train began to move, when a shower of bouquets was thrown in at the window, and a shrill voice shouted a last *buon viaggio*. It was Signora Celeste herself, who stood gesticulating on the platform as we steamed out of the station.

CHAPTER VII.

WE were careful, before going, to leave our address in England with the Franciscans, the Matteis, and the Curato of San Jacopo, to whom I sent two or three envelopes directed to myself and stamped ; and it was through occasional correspondence with all these that we heard enough of Giannetto and his wife to enable me to carry on the thread of their history.

When Fra Geronimo reached Venice, he established himself in the convent of his order, and set himself to watch.

All Giannetto's old passion for the sea returned when he again beheld it. In all weathers, at all hours, he was out,—now gliding

along the silent canals in the smooth, swift gondola—now rowing far out of the town and beyond the wide lagoons, dancing on the waves, and feeling a wild enjoyment in his freedom. He was never still ; a sort of burning, overpowering restlessness seemed to possess him, body and soul. He was always singing : when at home, bending over his little child, he would sing softly and sweetly, till the tears welled into Elvira's eyes ; when tossing on the sea, and the wind and waves were high, the passers-by leant forward with rapture, listening to his wild and thrilling tones, then drew back within the shelter of their gondolas with a shudder, at they knew not what.

Nothing seemed to affect his voice. When the violent heat came on, and the other singers at the opera found their voices becoming weak and hoarse, his was the same as ever—there was no variation in its power. After singing the whole night it was clear and

strong as at the beginning. His fellow-actors became uneasy and suspicious, though of what they could not define ; but involuntarily they drew further and further aloof from him, so that he and Elvira found themselves without friends, and with but few acquaintances, in Venice.

It was a calm sultry evening in July, and Giannetto had been out all through the afternoon. He was weary and heated, and lay back in his gondola, leaving its guidance (not according to his wont) to the gondolier. As they glided through the streets, the strong smell of the almost stagnant water sickened him. "Hasten!" he said; "an extra *buona-mano* for speed."

The gondolier smiled, and bent more willingly on his long oar. "The Signore is generous," he said. "I was idle, I was not working with a will; but times are bad, and, heaven help us! we have become lazy."

"Times are always bad in Venice," said Giannetto, irritably ; " it is always the same story with you all."

The man gave a little patient sigh. The gondola skimmed out of the Grand Canal, and stopped before the steps of a palace on one of the smaller canals. Giannetto paid him, and stepped lightly out.

It was a very old and crumbling, though once fine, building, this Palazzo Lucchetti, in which Giannetto and his family had taken apartments. One large room with hanging balconies looked on to the Grand Canal, but the long façade of the palace was on the smaller street. Beautiful it was in its decay, with its walls of great hewn stones, in which the rusted iron rings for torches yet remained. The posts to which the gondolas were fastened still bore the bright colours of the old family to whom the palace had belonged, and from whom it had taken its name ; but the dark water scarcely showed their reflections, the paint was so faded

away. Everything spoke of sadness and desolation—of a city whose glory is departed.

Giannetto mounted the broad white steps, passed through the small courtyard—where a few thirsty orange-trees drooped and pined for want of care—up a marble staircase, and into a suite of long lofty rooms. They were hung with old, faded green silk ; but the heavy stucco ceilings, richly gilt and painted, retained somewhat of their original lustre.

Through three of these rooms Giannetto passed, till he reached the furthest, that overhanging the Grand Canal, which was Elvira's favourite apartment.

It was nearly dark, the windows carefully closed with dark-blue blinds, excepting one which had been set wide open, and admitted a stream of almost visible heat.

On the floor in front of this window, and on the balcony without, five or six pigeons, beautiful in their soft opal plumage, were pecking up bits of bread and cake ; and among them,

with bare feet and shoulders, sat the dark-eyed little child, Felicità. The pigeons were billing and cooing all round her, some venturing even to hop on her tiny feet, causing her to crow with delight.

As Giannetto entered, Elvira came forward from the dark corner where she had been seated, and pointed to the child. "See, Nino," she said (for so she called him)—"look, Nino mine!—is it not pretty? The pigeons of St Mark love our little child; they come thus every day." Giannetto thought lovingly that she looked as pretty and as pure as the little stainless child; he looked down on her very fondly. "Alas!" she said, pressing her soft hand on his brow, "how it burns! It is too hot; you should not go out in the great heat on days like these."

Giannetto advanced to the little Felicità, and held out his hands. At his approach the pigeons took alarm, and began to fly out of the window. "See," said Giannetto, bitterly,

“all good and holy things fly at my approach !”

Elvira hastily snatched up her child and held it towards her husband, smiling. The little one put out her arms, and jumped to be taken.

“Here, Nino,” she replied ; “there is the best answer. Those foolish pigeons know quite well that a child cannot hurt them ; but they have not the same confidence in a man. Sometimes even *persons* as well as pigeons think you rather formidable—just now and then,” she added, her voice quivering a little.

“Not you, Elvira ? You at least are never afraid of me ?”

“No, no ; not I. Why should I fear you ? You are always good to me—too good by far ; but others—I cannot tell why—many others think you much to be dreaded. But here is Manna : she has come to take Felicità to bed ; she has not been well to-day. Nino, feel her hands and her little head ; they are burning !

And one little cheek is so scarlet, the other so pale ! All day she has been heavy and sleepy, and, till the pigeons came in, she has scarcely noticed anything."

"Poor little thing !" said Giannetto, kissing the upturned face ; "what ails my little one ?"

"Ah !" said the nurse, as she lifted and carried the child away, "it must be her teeth. If the Signora would only let me give her some of that medicine I told her of."

"No, no ; put her to sleep, Manna, and give her no medicines." The nurse left the room.

Giannetto had thrown himself down on a hard green sofa, and Elvira quietly seated herself on the ground beside him, holding and fondling his hand.

"Nino," she began hesitatingly, "you love little Felicità very much ?"

"Of course I love her."

"Nino, you would not like her to go away, and never see or think of you again ? It would grieve you, would it not ?"

Giannetto started up, and snatched away his hand. "Elvira, cannot you let me alone? I know well what you mean. When will you cease to plague me on this subject? I have told you again and again that these feelings of which you speak—these natural affections, as you call them—are those only of an educated mind. A peasant like my mother is not thus sentimental."

"But, Nino, you do not know, you cannot tell, what a mother's love is, and always must be. Educated! Why, look at the very animals, how they love their children!"

"Until they are grown up," said Giannetto—"till they are independent of them—and then they throw them off. Believe me, Elvira, your pity is wasted on my mother. I do not wish to see her; she would not care to see me,—and—and—I cannot go home."

Elvira sighed. After a little pause she said, gently, "Nino mine, do you not think sometimes that there are duties which should not

be left undone, however painful they may be ? Nino, she was left a widow very young ; she toiled for you, suffered for you, wept for you ; and—indeed, indeed, she loves you still.”

Giannetto turned round suddenly—“ How do you know ? What do you mean ? Have you heard anything ? Answer, Elvira ! ”

Elvira took a thin, carefully-written letter from her pocket : “ See,” she said—“ my mother has just sent me this ; she writes a few lines herself to say that, as it was directed to me, she had opened and read it. But, Nino, Nino, what is the matter ? Are you ill ? ”

Giannetto had become as white as a sheet. He had at once recognised the handwriting of the priest of San Jacopo. He snatched the letter from her ; it was not long, and a glance reassured him—his secret was safe.

As he sank back, the drops of perspiration stood on his brow. “ It is nothing, nothing, Elvira,” he said ; “ only a sudden pain. Read me the letter.” Elvira was not satisfied till

she had bathed his forehead with orange-flower water; and she sat fanning him with one hand, while holding the letter in the other. Giannetto acquiesced, willing that she should attribute his sudden agitation to illness.

This secret between himself and his wife was becoming unbearable to him. He lived in a perpetual dread lest Elvira should learn the particulars of his early history; and he felt a sort of conviction that, his secret once revealed, their severance would become inevitable.

"Now, Elvira," he said, "read me the letter. I wonder why he should write to you instead of to me this time?"

"Perhaps," she said, rather timidly—"perhaps some letter of yours has been lost. Indeed, so it must be; for he says they have had no news of you for very long. I will read it." She began—

"SIGNORA,—I feel that, without doubt, you may look upon my presuming to write to you

as a great impertinence, and that I have scarcely a right to do so ; but the very great interest and solicitude I have always felt for your husband cause me to beg for your indulgence. It is now a long time since I have received any answer to my letters, and I have no news of him to tell to his mother, so that she is breaking her heart ; and for her sake I have ventured to appeal to you, who are also a woman, and can understand better than a man what it is to feel herself forgotten by a son for whom she has toiled, and laboured, and suffered so much. The last we heard of him was, that he had taken a wife, and that in you he had found perfect happiness. He also told us that he is not your equal in birth—that you are a lady ; and it appears to me possible, in that case, that you may be ashamed of the poor old peasant-mother, and wish to keep her son entirely away from her. Is this true ? Ah ! if God has given you also a little child, you will be better able to understand what

her feelings must be ; for she has been a very fond and loving mother, and for many years he was all in all to her. She grows old now, and is worn out with care and pining for him ; and though you have both been very good, and sent her money constantly, she often says that could she see your husband once again, it would do her more good than all the comforts the money gives her. Can you not both come to San Jacopo ? You shall be treated as becomes your position ; I will see to that. Tell your husband that all his old friends and companions are well——”

“I had no friends, no companions,” broke in Giannetto, angrily. “The man is in his dotage !”

Elvira looked at him in astonishment before she resumed her reading.

“Tell him also that, should he come, they will all welcome him warmly. Several changes have taken place. Pietro’s wife is dead, the good Baldovinetta ; and he has married again,

old Masaniello's youngest daughter, whom we used to call 'Brutta e buona,' and she makes him an excellent wife. Tonino has been apprenticed to Andrea Castagno, and is a clever lad. Andrea kept on the new boat after his father's death in the great storm, though he was but sixteen at the time; and, by the blessing of San Jacopo, he has succeeded very well. I have employed the last sum of money your husband sent in buying for Carola that large *vigna* behind the place where old Nicolo's cottage stood, that was washed away; and she hires his son, Ceccho, to cultivate it, and keeps a mule of her own. It is her one happiness to think that all these riches come from her beloved son; but one moment's sight of him in his own person would be the richest gift he could bestow upon her—and she wearies Madonna to grant her this blessing. Dear Signora, forgive me if I take too great a liberty in thus addressing you; but I also am growing old and infirm, and Giannetto——”

Elvira paused. "Giannetto! Who is Giannetto?" she said. "It is I," answered her husband, with ill-concealed impatience. "That was the foolish name I always went by. I dropped it, for I hate the very sound of it."

"Foolish! oh no. I like the name—your mother's pet name for you." She returned to her letter—

"And Giannetto was as dear to me as any son could be to his father; so that, in addressing his wife, I feel as if I must know her already. If it be in your power, then, let Giannetto come back to his mother,—not to stay—I know well, and have explained to her, the different sphere of society to which he has attained. We would not, for the world, that he should give up his new pursuits, companions, or friends. Only this I ask—and further, I am bold enough to demand, as a Christian priest—that he should now and then remember that he is the only son of his mother, and she a widow."

The letter dropped from Elvira's hand, and she turned her brown, wistful eyes on her husband. He did not speak.

"It is a touching letter, Nino. The poor mother must have suffered very much. Is it quite impossible that, when we leave Venice, we should go to San Jacopo ? only for a few days—for one day even ?"

Giannetto leapt off the sofa, and paced up and down the room. "Elvira," he said, his face full of keen distress, "listen to what I say. What you ask is an impossibility. I cannot, and I will not, return there. I cannot tell you why—it concerns myself alone ; but, Elvira, trust me, it is a sufficient reason. There are some things in which a wife must trust her husband implicitly without striving to understand them, and this is one of them."

"And the poor mother ?" murmured Elvira.

Giannetto stamped on the ground in real

anger. "Elvira, do not go on like this. You do not know what you are talking of. I will take care that that meddling priest does not come between you and me."

"Stop, stop, Giannetto!" she cried, rising from the ground and clasping her hands; "do not say what you will repent of as soon as said. I will say no more, I promise you; but oh, Nino——"

"You will say no more; you have passed your word?"

"Nino! Nino!"

"It is a promise," he repeated, distinctly.

Giannetto took up the letter, tore it into a thousand pieces, and tossed them out of the window. Elvira covered her face with her hands, bitter tears forcing themselves through her clasped fingers.

Giannetto stood and looked at her wistfully. After a few moments, she pushed back the masses of dark hair from her brow, and came up to his side, raising her sweet face to be

kissed. He clasped her suddenly to him. "Elvira! Elvira! if I only could—if I only dared——" he stopped, the full consequences of what he might say flashing upon him. "But, Elvira, you will trust me; you, at least, will always trust me?"

"With my whole heart, Nino," she answered. "God will direct you aright. I will have faith in you. You are cold, Nino; you shiver."

"No, no; it is nothing—only that pain again."

Both their hearts were heavy that night. Giannetto came home late from the opera. After all was over, he had rowed far out to sea, striving to regain calmness. He had been singing magnificently. Applause resounded through the theatre, and from every side bouquets fell upon the stage. The heat was intense, but the house was crowded. But as he came off the stage, he could not help observing that, even while congratulat-

ing him, his fellow-actors shrank from him, and whispered behind his back. He felt very sore and aggrieved. And there was this ever-present trouble, too, between himself and his wife. It was all very hard to bear. Weary and heart-sick, he threw himself on his bed, and sank into the heavy sleep of exhausted nature.

Elvira, after he left her for the theatre, stole quietly away to her child. She dismissed the nurse, and sat watching it far into the hot summer night.

CHAPTER VIII.

ABOUT four o'clock in the morning the violent ringing of a bell echoed through the Palazzo Lucchetti, and Giannetto was aroused by a light gleaming in his face. Elvira, white and terrified, stood beside him. "Nino, Nino, get up! quick, quick! there is no time to lose! The child is ill. Oh, Nino! I fear she is dying!"

Giannetto sprang out of bed. "What is it, Elvira? What must I do?"

"Oh, fly, fly for a doctor! Call any one — only be quick! be quick! or she will die!"

Elvira hastened away swiftly as she had come. Giannetto dressed himself hurriedly,

and followed her to the room where the child lay. Terrible was the shock that awaited him. The little one lay in Elvira's lap, passing from one convulsion into another. None could have recognised in that face, so distorted and changed, the sweet calm of little Felicità.

Elvira looked up, almost wild in her anxiety. "Not gone yet! Nino, Nino, every moment is an hour!—not yet! Manna, you go! quick! we may yet save her; you know of some doctor? Oh, go! go!"

Manna, who had been kneeling by the child, sprang to her feet and rushed from the room, leaving the father and mother alone.

Elvira did not speak, but now and then a little moan came from her lips.

Giannetto sat down, drawing his chair forward and looking down on the child. "Elvira," he said hoarsely, "will she die? is she going to die?" Her sole answer was to raise her eyes to his with a look of agony. They sat watch-

ing—how long, they knew not; it seemed a year, though in reality but a few minutes.

An old doctor was living in an upper apartment in the Palazzo, and to him Manna and the landlady went. He came at once; and in five minutes the little one was placed in a warm bath, and for the time the danger was over. For hours they sat and watched. The little face regained its soft calm, the tossing limbs grew still, and she sank into a sweet calm sleep. They wrapped her in warm blankets and laid her on her bed. The doctor felt her pulse; it was even now, but for an occasional wild throb. He turned to Elvira and said, "She will do well now, if I mistake not; but give her the medicine I send you as often as you can."

He was going, but Elvira stopped him. "Pardon me," she said, "but tell me the real truth—will she die?"

The old doctor looked at her very compassionately. "Poor Signora," he said, "you

must not hope too much. I have never seen a more violent attack; and if it comes again ——” he shrugged his shoulders.

Every trace of colour fled out of Elvira's face and lips, and she grasped Giannetto's arm to support herself.

“Why tell her this?” he exclaimed, passionately. “Why should you make it worse by telling her beforehand?”

The doctor looked rather displeased. “Some say ‘tell,’ some ‘conceal.’ I, for my part, speak the truth when I am asked; and you, sir, should have the complaisance to hear me finish what I have to say. If, by giving the proper medicines, and having a warm bath always ready, you can keep off the attacks, well; if not——”

He took off his spectacles, beginning to wipe them with his large blue handkerchief. Giannetto sat down again moodily. With a deep bow, which all were too much preoccupied to acknowledge, the doctor quitted the room.

They heard him speaking outside to a little group of servants and lodgers, drawn together by sympathy and curiosity, headed by the Padrona or landlady. "It is a bad case, Signora Padrona—a bad case ; and I fear me they will lose their child. The first child, you say ? It is a pity ; but it is the will of Heaven. If the convulsions come on again, for the love of heaven, Signora Padrona, have a priest in the way with the holy unction ; for they are frightfully violent, and the child is very weak. Was there no one to tell them to put it in hot water at once ? What fools people are ! and the women in especial ! But it is too true. The mother is very young, and it is a first child. A thousand thanks, Signora ; no wine, but I would take a cup of coffee with cognac. A thousand thanks. With permission, I will wait here, and will snatch a moment's sleep—I cannot find it in my heart to go up-stairs. Ah ! there is the coffee—none in Venice like yours, Signora Padrona. It is now striking

the six hours. Well, well, I will take a little more repose." And the rough but kindly old doctor stretched himself on a couple of hard old-fashioned chairs.

The day came on, and grew into a fierce glare of heat, and still the little one slept. The blinds were drawn down, and kept constantly wetted by Manna with cold water; and a huge block of ice sent in by the landlady helped to keep the room comparatively cool.

All day Elvira sat at the foot of the bed, little simple books of devotion by her side, which now and then she took up. She could only read a few lines at a time, but they suggested thoughts on which she strove to fix her mind. When Manna brought her food, she ate it mechanically, for she knew that she must not waste her strength. Giannetto was so restless that she persuaded him to go out when mid-day had passed.

The doctor came in constantly. Elvira believed that all was going on well; but he did

not like the heavy sleep of the child, and often desired it to be roused, to swallow medicine.

Evening came again ; the sun went down in a bath of liquid fire, and fierce rays of dark crimson streaked the sky, still purple with glowing heat.

Giannetto came softly in. "How is she? how is she doing now?" he whispered. "Just the same. Thank God for this long sweet sleep!"

Elvira moved slowly to the little bed. As she gazed, a look of horror came over her face — the convulsions had returned. "Nino! Manna! it has come again!—quick! fly!" Giannetto flew up-stairs for the doctor; Manna brought forward the bath. The doctor, as he came hastily down, called out, "Signora Padrona — Signora, quick! send for him at once," and he followed Giannetto into the room.

The landlady knew only too well whom and what he meant. Down she went, on to the

steps at the door, and hastily called to a gondolier.

She was just about to step off the stairs, when another gondola came gliding swiftly round the corner, under the canopy of which, with his hands folded in his habit, sat the stern, upright figure of a Franciscan monk.

“Padre! padre!” she shouted, at the utmost pitch of her shrill Italian voice. “Padre! for the love of God!”

The friar started from his apparent reverie. “Stop,” he said to the gondolier. “I am wanted.”

The landlady bent forward,—“Father,” she repeated, “if you are a priest, come in—come in at once. A child is dying—the only child of Giovanni, the great singer.”

The friar stepped out of his gondola, and followed the kind-hearted woman, as, breathless and almost sobbing, she hastened up the stairs. “It is the hand of God,” he muttered to himself.

On they went, through the long suite of cool rooms, across the gallery at the end, into the sick-chamber.

One single glance was enough—they were too late.

The room was full of people. Elvira sat upon the floor with the child on her lap. Manna had lifted it out of the bath, and placed it there ; and, all unheeded, the water was dripping from its soft brown hair. As if turned to stone, the mother's eyes were fixed upon the tiny corpse. Manna's sobs rang through the room ; the others, mere spectators of the scene, lodgers and servants in the house, stood close round, and now and then one of them spoke a gentle word of sympathy. Giannetto remained motionless, with his arms folded, as he had stood to watch his child die.

This was the scene that met their eyes as the door opened.

All made way involuntarily as Fra Geronimo (for he it was) entered. All knelt when he

approached—all but one, the unhappy father, who, as the first sacred words broke the silence, stole away, crouching, creeping, cringing, as the voice of prayer upraised itself to heaven. Outside the door he stood, alone, an outcast from God and man.

They removed Elvira from the room. Gently, tenderly they carried her away, and laid her on the green couch in the large empty room. She was not insensible, but she lay stunned and tearless, without moving, where they placed her. They threw the window wide open and let in the evening air ; one little ray still lingered from the dying sunset, and checkered the polished floor. They sought for Giannetto, and sent him to her there. The friar was gone. He knew that this was not his time—that for his work patience was needful.

Giannetto stole in, and sat clasping his wife's hand, which lay in his quite cold and motionless.

Peck, peck, peck ! what was that ? and

then that soft-sounding cooing? Motionless they watched. One by one, pluming their soft wings, billing and cooing to each other, the pigeons of St Mark came gently in. They looked for the tiny hand that had fed them, for the little one that had loved them so well.

Peck, peck—there was no bread to-day. Was it only imaginary that the cooing voices took a wondering sound? They came closer, turning their pearly heads from side to side, passing in and out of the dying ray of light.

Elvira suddenly started forward and burst into a wild fit of hysterical weeping. With a loud whir of terror, the pigeons flew away.

The storm of grief let loose seemed to shake her from head to foot; her self-command had given way, and she knew not what she said. Clinging, holding on to Giannetto, she poured out the agony of her grief; now imploring him to tell her what the secret was that kept them apart, now telling him that she could and would trust him, but he must not

look at her like that, not be angry with her ; for her child was dead, and there was nothing left to her but him. Then she would call upon the child, calling her her comfort, her only hope for Nino's conversion. Fits of exhaustion followed, but the slightest word brought back the flood of agony.

So through the long, long night, till another morning dawned. Then Giannetto took his pale wife by the hand, and led her from the chamber. She let him do what he wished with her, following him whither he would.

Down the silent canals they passed, crossed the piazza of St Mark, to the door of the great cathedral. "Go in," he murmured hoarsely ; and she obeyed.

Compared to the outer air it was dark, but she saw at once what her eyes mechanically sought. Before the high altar stood a little bier, covered by a pall as white as driven snow ; wreaths of lovely flowers lay round and upon it, not all white, but red, and purple, and gold,

glowing with colours, typical of that glory to which the child had attained. Elvira sank upon her knees, and her heart rose up in fervent prayer.

In a far corner of the cathedral, where it was all dark and in shadow, knelt the Franciscan, pale from fasting, exhausted by the vigils of a long night, in which, in pain and penance, he had been wrestling for a fallen soul.

CHAPTER IX.

"I AM sure we shall be too early, John," said Amy to her husband. "Nonsense, Amy; we are not in London. Remember how early Roman hours are."

They were driving up to the door of a house in Rome one evening on which some English friends had a large party. It was a soft oppressive evening; the sirocco had been blowing all day, making the air heavy and languid. They drove rattling under the covered doorway, the heavy Roman carriage-horses stopping with a suddenness which threw Amy forward.

"How I hate that way of stopping!" she

exclaimed, as she shook out her ruffled plumes, and followed the porter up-stairs.

The room in which the lady of the house received her guests was pretty and peculiar. It had often been used for private theatricals, and possessed a recess between the two tall French windows, filled by a raised orchestra or stage, now brilliant with flowers, and enlivened by a large cage full of little merry birds. The hostess, seeing that Amy was watching them, told her that they were a constant source of anxiety to her children ; for, from time to time, three or four of the poor little prisoners disappeared, and such a disappearance was too often followed by a dish of so-called larks at dinner, causing most uncomfortable misgivings.

The room was full of guests, most of them English ; but there was a sprinkling of German *attachés*, who looked bored, and twirled their yellow moustaches ; and a few Italians, chiefly men. The English were of every description

—young eldest sons “doing” Rome ; mammas giving fair, very young daughters, a first taste of society before bringing them out in London ; most of the regular English residents in Rome ; and here and there an Italian artist, very much out of his element.

There was a little music. The young lady of the house sang tolerably, and her music-master, a small dapper Italian, accompanied her in high glee ; for she sang songs composed by himself, of the very weakest description. Ices were handed round at intervals, and tea, from which the Italians shrank back involuntarily.

The mixture of social elements was too incongruous, conversation flagged, and Amy felt wearied. She pushed open the half-closed window, and went out to enjoy the cool of the little garden.

It was very pretty in its own way ; and it amused her to watch a tame jackdaw hopping about on the wall, with its head very much on

one side. There was a good deal to explore and discover, notwithstanding the diminutiveness of the place. On the right was a little grotto, curtained with maidenhair fern, in which a nymph in white marble, nearly the size of life, reposed, in utter disproportion to the dimensions of her shrine. There was a little grove also ; as you wandered through its mazes you came upon busts, and statues, and fountains full of gold-fish ; many of the busts had lost their noses, but they were nevertheless suggestive, all of them being antique. Over one fountain the ivy and leaves grew very thickly, and half hidden among them lay a little marble Cupid asleep. Amy, wandering about, was bending down to look at him more nearly, when a sound from the drawing-room made her suddenly turn back and approach the window.

It was a sound of singing, so lovely that she would not interrupt or break the spell, but leant against the wall outside, in the midst of

a great bush of scarlet salvias, which contrasted prettily with the soft white gown she wore.

She could just see enough to perceive that the little singing-master was accompanying ; his mobile Italian face was screwed into an expression of ecstasy, as the glorious full notes of a wonderful tenor voice swelled through the room—now it rose to inconceivable power, now softened till the strain was almost heavenly in its sweetness. Amy was entranced ; she stood motionless till the last sound died away. The silence was broken by a sudden burst of applause, and the gentlemen gathered round the singer.

Amy took advantage of the movement, and came in unobserved amid the general confusion. “Who is he? what is his name?” she asked her nearest neighbour.

“It is Giovanni, the great tenor ; he has just come to Rome. Did you ever hear such a voice? is it not lovely, glorious?” And the old English lady whom she had addressed

very quietly managed to wipe away a tear. There was a general hush; people fell back, many seized themselves, and Giovanni sang again.

Amy felt the sort of superstitious dread creep over her that her partial knowledge of his history gave. She could not take her eyes off his face, it seemed so altered, and yet so like what it had been when she first saw him.

The second song over, Giovanni moved away from the piano, while renewed murmurs of admiration filled the room.

The crowd made way, and the lady of the house bustled up to Amy. "Allow me to introduce Signora Giovanni," she said, in French, adding, in a low voice, as she hurried away,— "his wife, you know — she is anxious to be presented to you."

Amy made room on the sofa beside her for the pale but still lovely Elvira, who, in her heavy black velvet gown, looked even more white and frail than usual.

“I must ask a thousand pardons, Signora,” she began at once; “but your likeness to your sister struck me so forcibly, that I asked who you were, and could not resist taking the liberty of begging to be presented to you.”

“I am very glad of it,” said Amy; “I have heard so much of you that I have been long anxious to make your acquaintance, and to meet your husband again. I must indeed congratulate you. What a talent! What a singularly beautiful voice!”

“The Signora is too good. Yes, she is right; it is a wonderful talent. I trust that the Signor Conte your father is in good health; and your sister, she is well?”

“They are both well; and it will give them great pleasure to hear that I have seen you. They have often spoken to me of you, and of Signor Giovanni,—and the baby, little Felicità, is she well?”

Elvira showed no more signs of emotion

than the quivering of her voice, as she answered — “Thank you, dear Signora; but when you write to them, will you tell them that she is dead?”

Amy looked and felt shocked at this answer to her question; but Elvira smiled very sweetly, and went on,—“Are your little children well? The Signora Elena used to tell me about them when we were at Florence. Are they with you? But no! Surely you have not brought them so long a journey?”

“No, indeed!” answered Amy; “they are too young. I thought it best to leave them at home. Helen has charge of them.”

“Ah, what a happiness for her!”

“By the by, Signora Giovanni,” said Amy, suddenly, “do you ever see anything of a certain Fra Geronimo, a Franciscan, in whom my father was much interested? I think (but I am not sure) that you knew him, that he was your friend?”

“No, no,” said Elvira—“not then; but it

is curious that you should ask. We did not know him then. Without doubt, we mean the same person—the great preacher. We know him now ; but it was accidentally, and under sad circumstances, that we first met him, about six months ago, at Venice. He is in Rome now, I understand ; and this very Sunday that comes, he is to preach at Santa Maria del Popolo. If the Signora has not heard him, she should go ; for it is a wonderful power, and given to few. Do you remain long in Rome ? Are you interested ? amused ? ”

“ Very much ; it is a marvellous place. And you, have you been here long ? ”

“ We have but now come. My husband has accepted a very short engagement till the beginning of Lent. We have been lately at Turin and at Milan. He does not like the music here, neither the pieces given, nor the musicians—they are all bad ; there is no school, no method, he says, except in the Papal choir, and that stands by itself, apart.

They are ill-taught at the opera; but the voices are good—fine in tone and quality.”

Giannetto approached his wife. “Elvira,” he said, “I fear that we must take leave; for I have promised to sing elsewhere to-night.” Elvira rose, and, with her pretty Italian curtsy, wished Amy good-night.

Scarcely were they gone when a perfect buzz of conversation arose, to which Amy listened, anxious to hear all she could about them. One of the gentlemen—an old *habitué* of Roman society—professed to know more than any one. He was talking rather mysteriously as Amy drew her chair into the little circle which had formed itself round him.

“Yes,” he was saying, “there is something decidedly odd about the man and his pretty wife. A friend of mine told me that at Venice very strange things were said about him, and the extraordinary power and unchanging quality of his voice. For instance, once he came to the opera, half fainting with fatigue

—as white as a sheet, and trembling as if with palsy ; but when he opened his mouth, his voice was as grand and clear as if he was in the fullest strength. My friend heard afterwards that he had lost his only child that very morning.”

“ But,” said one of the bystanders, “ a very powerful will will often carry one through on such occasions.”

“ True ; but how would you account for this—that through heat and cold, draughts, crowds, all those accidents that most affect a singer’s voice, his has never been known to vary ? He is always singing, never gives himself any rest. No, no, my friends ; it is very unaccountable, and not so easy to explain as you seem to think it.”

Here the little singing-master broke in—
“ Ah, Signori ! is he not a wonder, a marvel ? After one has heard him, one can listen to no more. Truly, it seems to me that his singing is a *finale* to the music of the evening.”

"Do you know him? Are you acquainted with his history?"

"I know him, certainly; but I know nothing of his history. I have been at his house occasionally. He is good and charitable, and gives largely. I know of some very poor families in Venice to whom he has been very kind; and even to others who are apparently in better circumstances, but who, God knows, often need as much, he has been a true friend." His little twinkling eyes glistened as he spoke.

"And his wife, who is she?"

"I can tell you that," said Amy, gently. "She is the daughter of a very respectable Government official at Florence; and my father both knew and respected the family much. There is nothing at all mysterious about her," she added, smiling.

When the party had broken up, and Amy was alone with her husband in the carriage, she told him how anxious she was not to lose

sight of Giovanni and Elvira, for she felt the deepest interest in both, but especially in the sad-looking young wife. But days passed in the usual whirl of life in Rome, and they never chanced to meet.

The time passed in sight-seeing all day, going into society at night, and occasionally a visit to the opera. Giannetto was so great a man now that he could afford to be capricious; he sang rather irregularly—sometimes disappointing his audiences by refusing to do so.

The Carnival approached, and gaieties increased; balls and parties every night, the usual fun in the Corso, the throwing of *confetti*, of bouquets, bonbons, &c., from balconies and windows—all the customary noise and bustle, which Amy and her husband were still young enough to enter into and enjoy most thoroughly.

Then came the sudden change—the falling, as it were, of the black veil of Lent over the

merry streets. No one who has not seen it can imagine the transformation of Rome, not only outer but inner Rome, at that season; for the streets, no longer crowded with singing, dancing revellers, are quiet and empty,—the same crowds that lately swarmed in them kneel in the churches, calm, collected, and devout; some hundreds of them have passed from the wildest excitement to the deepest prostration of spirit; all are alike sobered and absorbed by the religious duties of the season.

The weather changed, and became cold and bleak; a bitter *tramontana* swept the streets; and most of the English left Rome for Naples, there to spend the weeks between the beginning of Lent and the Easter festivities.

Giannetto and Elvira remained in Rome. He spent most of his days wandering in the Campagna, often not coming home till late, for his restlessness kept him always moving. Her life sank into a gentle, regular monotony. Like most Italian women, Elvira had no re-

sources in herself—she neither drew nor worked, she scarcely ever read ; but, during this season, she passed almost all her time in church. There she seemed really happy ; and her neighbours called her *dévoté*, a saint. Her confessor, Fra Geronimo, encouraged her. “ Courage, daughter,” he would say ; “ pray—fast and pray. Wrestle as I wrestle, and the soul of your husband will be given to us.”

Under a stern sense of duty, Fra Geronimo had never revealed to Elvira what he knew of her husband’s history, so of that she was ignorant still.

Giannetto seemed instinctively to know where and how she passed her time, for he never asked. More and more taciturn and sad he grew, till all the sweet smiles with which she greeted him failed to elicit one in return. She thought that the enforced idleness of Lent told on his spirits, and she made many efforts to rouse and cheer him, but too often in vain.

One day he came in looking brighter and more lively than he had done for a long time. He was flourishing a letter in his hand. "Elvira, what say you to this?" he cried; "the offer of an engagement in London—from Covent Garden! The offer is a magnificent one. Tell me, dear one, should you not like the change?—the novelty of it all? You would see your English friends. What do you say?"

"England! London!—ah! shall we really go there?"

"Yes, really; I wait but your consent to accept. They are appreciative, these English—it will be a pleasure to sing to them. It will do you good, Elvira—the cool summer will bring the colour into my dear one's pale face."

The little pale face was now flushed with pleasure at the unwonted brightness of his tone, and she looked up eagerly. "Ah, Nino mine, it will do us both good! When do we go?"

“Immediately after Easter, when London is most full. More fame to be won yet, Elvira. I climb ! I climb ! and before long it shall be said that I am the greatest singer the world has ever seen !” His face flushed, his eyes sparkled, and he drank in the proud conviction that the crown of his ambition was coming, an unrivalled and world-wide fame.

“Ah ! truly there is none to compare with my Nino,” said his young wife, twining her arms around him ; “and there is nothing like the gift of song.”

That evening a small close carriage stopped before the ‘Fontana di Trevi.’ There is a well-known and cherished superstition, that if you drink of this water the night before leaving Rome it insures your return.

Out of the carriage stepped Amy and her husband, and descended the steps to the fountain-edge. The water sparkled and danced in the moonlight ; and the shadows of the rocks, Tritons, and great sea-horses were so

disturbed, that it seemed almost as if they were in truth plunging and tumbling in the clear streams which dashed over them.

Giannetto and Elvira passed slowly by on foot, enjoying a moonlight walk.

"See, Elvira, there are travellers going down to drink at the fountain to insure a return to Rome!"

Elvira let go his arm. "Look, look, Nino!" she said; "it is the English Signora Aimée and her husband." And she went down the steps.

"Once, twice, three times for good luck!" exclaimed Amy, drinking the clear, sweet water.

"It is all nonsense," grumbled her husband—but he drank nevertheless.

"Signora, Signora Aimée," said Elvira's soft voice; "so you leave Rome?"

Amy turned round eagerly. "I am so glad to have seen you once more. Yes, we go to-morrow."

"I am glad to be able to wish you a good journey." She held out her hand. Amy took it, and with a sudden impulse bent down and kissed her.

She went away to her carriage, and Elvira stood watching till they were out of sight.

Giannetto drew her hand under his arm. "How cold you are, child! come home at once." He stooped and drank a handful of the water. "It is refreshing," he said; "but do not let us delay—these Roman nights are treacherous."

CHAPTER X.

ELVIRA caught a very severe cold that night—so severe that for days she was unable to leave her bed. Like all ailments in Rome, it partook of the nature of low fever, and weakened her greatly. Easter came and went ; but when the day drew near on which Giannetto's London engagement was to begin, she was still too weak for so long a journey. Giannetto, therefore, carefully wrapping her up, and making her as comfortable as possible, took her to Florence, and left her under the loving care of Signora Mattei, while he continued his journey by himself.

Elvira was received by her mother with rapturous joy ; the brothers and sisters danced

round her ; her old father would scarcely let her out of his sight. All this cheered and comforted her wonderfully. There was also the excitement of a wedding in prospect. Adelaide, her second sister, a pretty, dark-eyed girl of seventeen, was to be married to her *fiancé*, Gaetano Vacchini.

Elvira did not recover her strength as they had hoped she would. She was unable to enter into all the bustle of the family arrangements ; but it was her great pleasure to furnish Adelaide with money, and send her out shopping with her mother, or with Violante the servant, and then to witness the ecstasies of the delighted girl when she brought home and exhibited her finery.

“ See, see, Elvira ! this lace, how beautiful ! and a silk gown of the new colour ! Carola Brei wore one like it at their house ; and she said to me, ‘ Adelaide, now is your time ; do not be married without one. Extravagant ! Ah, bah ! if one is not extravagant when one

is married, when is one to be so? And one must be well dressed at first.' Then see! this shawl. I wept, I entreated the mamma; but she would not give it to me. She said that she had not a *baiocco* left—that it was flimsy trash; and now, thanks to you—— and Adelaide threw her arms round her sister's neck, half smothering her with kisses.

The wedding-day came, and it was Elvira's task to dress her sister in the pretty white bridal-dress her own taste had chosen. She could not keep her tears from falling fast as she watched the little procession start from the door. She was not strong enough for the whole ceremony, so she reserved herself for the last part, waiting till the little procession appeared in sight on their return from the Mairie in the Borgo Ognissanti, and then joining them on their way to church. The religious ceremony was performed at their parish church, San Marco.

They returned home; and then followed all

the packing up of large boxes of bonbons, to be sent to the friends and relations of the bride and bridegroom, so that there was no time for sitting down to think ; and the first leisure moment had to be spent in writing a long account of all that had passed to Giannetto in London.

Elvira was now always on the sofa. Every day her loving friends tried to believe that she was better ; every night found her more weak and restless ; and those of their acquaintance less interested and more experienced, perceived too clearly that the bright flush on her cheek was not the hue of returning health.

The day after the wedding brought a large packet of extracts from the English newspapers. Giannetto had found among the chorus-singers a young Italian who understood English pretty well. He was very poor, and thankful to be employed in making rough translations from all the papers of the reports of the great tenor's successes at Covent Garden, for El-

vira's benefit. Her pride in her husband's achievements was much increased by the praises thus bestowed on him.

She lay on the sofa, reading them aloud, Signora Celeste, with hands and eyes uplifted, beside her ; the old Cavaliere, violin in hand, resting it on the ground, and softly beating time with the bow ; the children in front ; Violante, her sleeves tucked up above her elbows, behind,—all listening as she read how Giannetto had been recalled four times after the fall of the curtain—how each time bouquets had been thrown from every part of the house—and how, on one occasion, he had been three times encored. “No voice,” one of the papers said, “had ever been heard in England at all approaching the voice of the new tenor in power or beauty. It was only a pity that he was not a better actor ; there was a want of grace in the lighter scenes, his efforts at gaiety and playfulness appearing forced and unnatural.” Elvira coloured, and all her listeners defiantly

declared that newspaper criticisms were never to be relied on, with the true inconsistency of admiring affection. The papers went on to notice the wonderful strength of Signor Giovanni's voice—how, after singing all night and numerous encores, it was as fresh as ever ; and finally, they prophesied that, if the slight defects in his acting could be got over, he would be in truth the very first of his profession.

Elvira put down the papers with a proud heart. She kept them always beside her ; for whenever friends and visitors came in (which happened very frequently), Signora Celeste would come bustling up, insisting on reading the whole set of them again ; for she dearly loved the congratulations of her neighbours on her now famous son-in-law's success, and was never tired of hearing them reiterated.

Giannetto was happy in London. His success was complete. He found himself plunged into all the gaities of a large musical and artistic society, of which he speedily became an

habitué. He enjoyed the perfection which music, both instrumental and vocal, has attained in England; and, more than all, he enjoyed finding worthy support in his fellow-singers. The "cast" at Covent Garden was a fine one, the orchestra in first-rate condition. No *primo tenore* could have wished for a better introduction to a new audience. He was rich. He was famous.

Giannetto would scarcely acknowledge to himself that it was almost a relief to be away from his wife. Not that he did not love her. His attachment to her was passionate as his Italian nature, but it was the very force of that attachment which gave him the feeling of relief. He had no longer to combat the almost ungovernable longing to tell her his whole life's history, to break down the barrier which his want of confidence had raised between them. While thus absent, he was no longer tormented by her wistful looks. When his abnegation of religion, his absolute alienation from God,

betrayed itself, those amongst whom he now lived seemed to be indifferent to such matters, and for the time he felt himself free.

Giannetto studied music indefatigably. He also devoted much time to the improvement of his general education. He engaged a tutor, and worked hard, endeavouring to raise himself to the level of his better-educated companions. Still, occasionally, the old fits of restlessness would return irresistibly for days at a time, during which he could settle to no definite occupation.

He was not altogether popular. He was too capricious, and often too moody, to please. He made a point of never permitting companionship to advance beyond a certain limit ; so that many who, attracted by his singular power of fascination, imagined themselves on the road to intimacy and confidence, suddenly found their advances coldly received, and themselves treated with something not unlike repulsion. At the same time, he had few enemies. He was never

boastful or bragging. The proud feelings of gratified ambition that swelled his heart were for himself alone. Outwardly he appeared too haughty to be vain ; and he treated his unprecedented success as so much a matter of course, that the lookers-on often wondered whether this arose from the most sublime affectation or simple indifference.

The days passed on ; and as the time of Giannetto's return drew near, Elvira became restless and anxious. Her strength began to fail rapidly under a burning inward fever which consumed her ; and by degrees a strong conviction dawned upon her that she had not long to live.

One day the Cavaliere, entering the music-room, where Elvira usually passed her mornings on the sofa, found her weeping over a letter just received. The kind old man hastily drew a chair near to her, and sat looking at her wistfully through his large spectacles.

“ No bad news, my precious child ? ”

Elvira shook her head. "It is nothing, nothing ; only that I am very weak, very foolish. Nino cannot be here for a fortnight more ; he has accepted an engagement which will keep him longer in England. Ah, father, dear father ! I feel as if there were no time to lose. I must see him before I die !"

"Die ! Elvira, child, do not speak of dying."

"I must speak of it, for the time is short ; and I must—*Dio mio* !—I must see him before I die. Oh, father mine, I am frightened when I think that I may not see him again ; I have so much to say to him."

The old Cavaliere slowly brushed away two large tears before he answered—"Alas, my child ! I fear sometimes that your life has not been a happy one."

"Happy ? Ah yes ! happier far than I deserve—but for one grief, one sorrow."

"Felicità ?"

"No, no ; that grief has at times been almost a joy. I mean that Nino—— Alas !

what can I say ? he loves not God nor holy things."

" Poor little one ! "

" Ah, father mine, I have never spoken of this except to him and in my prayers ; but now—the relief, the comfort of telling all to you ! You say nothing ; you only grieve with me. It is that I want. Father, what is this mystery ? What does it all mean ? Oh, if this barrier could but be broken down that stands between us ! Why will he not go to his old home ? Alas ! what does it all mean ? "

" My child," began the Cavaliere, " sometimes the indifference of youth——"

" It is not indifference—indeed, not indifference. When I have spoken to him, I have seen the look of grief, the shadow of some great unspoken sorrow, in his face. He seems to shrink—to be afraid—— Sometimes—I dread that—that some great crime. . . . My God ! what have I said ? "

She buried her face in her hands, shuddering violently.

The Cavaliere laid his hand on her head. "Do not fear, my child. No one is here but your old father, who will help you if he can."

Elvira raised herself again. "Father," she said, "I cannot understand it. When I speak of his mother, he assumes a harshness foreign to his nature. Then, and then only, he has been unkind to me. Alas! he made me promise never to ask him to go home again; but while he spoke so harshly, his lips were quivering, his eyes looked at me in such agony. Ah! what can it mean?—what can it mean?"

"My precious child!"

"Long ago, my mother had an idea that all was not right. I know not why, but she thought it was something to do with his voice—possibly that he might have become a singer in defiance of the wishes of his mother and his

friends—who knows ? I cannot tell why she thought so. She tried to learn what she could from the English Conte. He had nothing to tell her. What could he have had to say ? And, alas ! the fact remains the same. And he may die impenitent, unabsolved. *Dio mio !* my heart will break ! ”

“ Elvira, darling ! ”

“ Oh, father, night and day I pray that I may be spared to see him once—only once again ! Through the long hours of the night, when I lie awake, I am planning what to say to him, what arguments to use, what points to urge ; and I am so ignorant, it all ends in this, ‘ Nino, Nino ! if you love me—for my sake ! ’ ”

The old Cavaliere only kissed her forehead ; his voice was choked—he could not speak. Elvira looked up at him with her large sad eyes. She went on—“ Fra Geronimo tells me that if I am patient, and go on hoping and praying, he will at last be won ; but time

goes on, and he cannot come home for a fortnight longer, and who knows whether I shall live so long? Father, give me this promise—if I should get worse, send an express for him at once. Let me feel that I can rely on this. Even should it be a false alarm, he will forgive it; and I must see him before I die.”

“I promise, Elvira, my darling; let me write at once. Surely it is better that he should be with you now?”

“No; do not call him home if you can help it. Sometimes I feel as if the very longing to see him again will serve to keep me alive until he comes. Father, dear father, if I fail in persuading him, do not give him up; but, for my sake, look on him as you would on a son of your own.” She went on, almost to herself, “Nino loves his mother, I am sure of it; and he loves that good priest who wrote to me. What can it mean? Why does he feign anger when I speak of them? Why does he make

believe that he does not love them? It cannot be as my mother thought—they would have been so proud of his singing; and yet how unwilling he is to speak of his voice. His life before we first met is a perfect blank to me."

The Cavaliere resumed gently, "My child, are you sure that you are not imagining all kinds of foolish things? Giovanni is young, and strong, and thoughtless. When sorrow comes, or illness, or any sad experience, he will turn where only comfort can be found."

"Father, have you then not noticed the dread he has of sacred things? It is not indifference. I have seen him stand looking through the door into a church, with a look of longing that went to my heart. Then if I begged him to come in, he would be angry, and irritable; but I could see his great distress. Once he said to me, 'You do not know the sacrifice you wish me to make;' and I did not

know — alas ! I sometimes fear that I shall never know—what he meant.”


Though exhausted at the time, Elvira felt much comfort from this conversation with her father. It was a relief to have spoken of her sorrows ; and his silent sympathy was more to her than any words could have been.

CHAPTER XI.

THE season came to an end in London, Parliament adjourned, and the fashionable world dispersed in all directions. Giovanni's last appearance at Covent Garden was over ; and, rich in fame and purse, he prepared to return home.

But yet one more triumph awaited him. He received an offer from Paris, too liberal for him to refuse. He consented to sing for two nights only, on condition of the terms being doubled. The arrogant demand was immediately acceded to, and Giovanni went over to Paris.

His success was complete. He was borne from the concert-hall on the shoulders of the crowd. Wherever he went they flocked to see



him. He received presents of every description, bouquets and jewels ; the Conservatoire crowned him, and bestowed honorary titles on him.

“I have nothing left to wish for,” he wrote to Elvira. “I am on the topmost step of the ladder. Rejoice with me ; I have nothing more to win.”

He returned to his hotel the last night before leaving Paris, to find a foreign despatch on the table. The message was very brief : “Elvira is frightfully ill ; come quickly, if you would see her alive.”

Who can describe the misery of that journey ? Night and day he travelled, and it seemed to him that the swift express trains crawled at a foot-pace. The time lost in crossing Mont Cenis seemed interminable—double and treble relays of horses and mules were sent on, but the time seemed endless.

He reached Florence at last. There, waiting for him at the station, stood the old Cavaliere. “She is better !” he shouted, before the train

had time to stop. "She is already better, thanks be to God!"

Before many moments had passed, Giannetto stood by the bedside of his wife.

Though the summer was at its height, the warm weather had not restored Elvira's strength. Her family, always beside her, did not perceive how thin she grew; and they became so much accustomed to the little short cough, which had never left her since her illness at Rome, that at last they scarcely noticed it at all.

The lovely colour that now so frequently succeeded her paleness, foreshadowed, alas! too truly, the dreaded *malattia Inglese*—the consumption that is so little known, but so greatly feared, in Italy. She had not appeared more failing or ill than usual, when one day she was seized with a very violent fit of coughing, attended with much pain. Fearful that she had caught fresh cold, they sent for the doctor, who pronounced her to be suffering from acute

inflammation of the lungs. "She cannot live," said the doctor ; "the disease gains ground. It may be days or weeks, possibly months ; but I can do nothing."

Two days afterwards she broke a blood-vessel ; and the danger seemed so imminent that they at once telegraphed for Giannetto. Before his arrival, however, the first anxiety had passed away ; and, although much weakened, she was pronounced out of immediate danger.

Giannetto proved a most tender and efficient nurse ; but he absolutely refused to believe in her danger, and was almost rude to the doctor when he spoke despondingly of his patient's state. He was always insisting that she was better, getting well.

Everything that money could procure of the rarest and most costly nature he obtained for Elvira ; soft eider-down from Germany, rich Indian shawls, luxurious English sofas and invalid chairs. He liked her to wear costly lace, and put beautiful rings that he had pur-

chased for her in London and Paris on her little thin fingers.

“My Elvira is a great and rich lady,” he said to her; “and when she is well again, we will buy a beautiful villa at Florence, and become grand Signori.”

She would sometimes hold out her fingers and watch the rings drop off one by one. “Look, Nino mine,” she said; “like these, the pleasures and riches of this world are dropping from me!” He could not be angry with her now when she said these things.

Fra Geronimo was living at his Franciscan home at Fiesole when the news reached him of Giannetto’s return to Florence. He waited some days, and then determined that he would seek him out. Two or three times he called at the Casa Mattei, and each time Giannetto was denied to him. Once Elvira sent for him, and begged him to see her husband; and, if necessary, to force him into an interview.

“Father,” she said, “I feel that every day

that passes now is an opportunity lost. See him, and tell him that I am dying—that before many weeks he will be alone ; and tell him that I cannot die till his soul is safe, till he returns to the God whom he has forsaken. Father,” she added suddenly, the hectic hue flushing into her face, “it is not that he does not believe ; he believes—he suffers—I know it.”

“He believes and suffers,” repeated the friar. “My daughter, I have prayed long for him. I have striven against the power of the enemy ; and by God’s grace I shall prevail, and his soul shall be saved !”

That night, when all were at rest, Fra Geronimo slowly and patiently paced the Borgo Pinti. He knew that this was the hour in which Giannetto allowed himself exercise and relaxation from the constant attendance on his wife ; and he awaited his return homeward.

The night was calm and still, the silence only now and then broken by the irregular

clang of different church - bells, telling the quarters of each passing hour. The shadow of the tall friar looked almost gigantic as it fell before him ; and Giannetto started back when he saw it, as he came up the street, and the song he had been softly singing died away unfinished on his lips.

“Giannetto,” said the friar—and Giannetto started again at the sound of his old, once familiar name—“I have sought you day after day, and the doors are closed against me. I must speak with you, Giannetto.”

“Would that you would leave me to myself,” said Giannetto, angrily ; “I need no meddling monk to pry into my affairs.”

The friar laid his hand powerfully upon his arm. “I know your secret,” he said. “You have nothing to tell me that I do not know.”

Giannetto shuddered. “Then I need tell you nothing, Father. Leave me in peace.”

They had reached the door of the house.

Almost as if the hand of the friar acted on him as a spell, Giannetto opened it; and they passed side by side into a large room on the ground-floor. It was not dark, for the moon streamed in, and her ghostly, colourless light filled the room.

Giannetto flung himself down on a chair, his face turned sullenly away. Fra Geronimo slowly paced the room, his eyes bent on the ground.

“Giannetto,” he said—and the low hollow tone spoke of mental and physical suffering —“I must have you listen, and forgive me if I speak too much of myself. I was once young, and strong, and brilliant, as you are now. My life began in courts. I was rich, I was prosperous, and beloved. Giannetto, I also was a scoffer. To me, God was a mockery; religion the foolery of priests and women. My life was all enjoyment. I cared for nothing, thought of nothing, but the pleasures of the hour. I watched my mother’s heart break

slowly ; for, Giannetto, she loved me—I was her idol, and I spurned her God. She had another son.” The friar’s voice grew lower and more husky as he spoke on.

“This son was young, and fresh, and innocent. On her deathbed she charged me to guard and watch over him for her sake. O God ! O God ! I swore to do so. I broke the oath. I was wild, dissolute, and recked not what I did. Into the dark regions of sin and hell I led him. I surrounded him with temptation. I laughed to see him yield ; and thus I led him on, from bad to worse, till the measure of his iniquity was full, and there was no time for atonement. Giannetto, he died cursing God and man ; and I knew that I—I—his brother, his sworn guardian—had driven him to damnation !”

He paused in his walk to and fro, and clasping his hands, he stood before Giannetto, who had bowed his head on the table.

“I tell you, that since that hour I have

known no peace. I tore myself from home, —it was a time of madness and despair. I sought oblivion in vain ; the wild eyes of my dying brother haunted me night and day, and the awful blasphemy of his words, as the foam of death was gathering on his lips—good God ! they haunt me now. Then came a time of illness, and all said that I must die ; but life was strong within me, and there was work for me to do. I lived—a blighted, suffering man—for God had work for me to do.

“There was a priest, an old man, who came to tend me. God has rewarded him for what he did for me. He gave me hope ; he bade me spend my life in bringing souls to God. ‘Atone,’ he said ; ‘bring back the fallen ones to Christ ; and so, by saving many souls, atone for destroying one.’

“I went forth to the combat, armed by St Francis with Humility, Fasting, and Poverty ; and the years go on, but the atonement is yet unaccomplished. I pray, I fast ; but there is

one soul I cannot win, there is one sinner I cannot save. Giannetto, have pity on me—have pity on yourself!”

He stood before him, tall and powerful; and the pale moon lit up his figure, leaving Giannetto shrunken, shivering in the shade. The monk's voice changed to a softer, gentler strain—

“Nino, my son, there is not much time remaining. The light of another world begins to beam on the brow of your angel-wife—she is dying! You strive not to believe it; but, Nino, it is true. Not many weeks are left you of her love—the time flies fast,—repent while yet she lives, and let her die in peace! Tell her all. You have much to renounce—fame, riches, happiness—but you have all to gain. I charge you, if you love her, to repent!” Another pause. The friar sank on his knees.

“Once more, Giannetto, I beseech you to repent! Suffering! what is present suffering

compared to the peace which passes all understanding? What is daily, hourly suffering, compared to the agony of unrepentant remorse—remorse that will stand beside you night and day, will infuse a bitter gall into every pleasure, will sharpen every pain, and will linger on in the very memory of your young dead wife? Have pity on Elvira—have pity on yourself!”

Still Giannetto lay with his arms stretched out before him, and his head hidden. He writhed as the friar spoke, but he answered nothing.

Once more the friar rose to his full height, gazing down on the prostrate figure—“Giannetto, one more appeal! Who are you, what are you, that you should brave the wrath of God? The worm crushed under the foot of man is not more impotent or more contemptible. There, as you stand, the strength of manhood pours through your veins, your intellect

tells you that in knowledge of good and evil man is as a god, and yet, in the pride of your being, you cannot understand what it is to die. Now is your hour, you say; but the hour passes away, and you are not. You believe—I know it; it is not that you cannot believe. It is that openly and avowedly you say, ‘Let me eat and drink, for to-morrow I die!’ And thus you would make the Word of God of none effect; and such will be the end—you will eat and drink, and to-morrow you die—unless—— My son, my son! eighteen hundred years ago, an Atonement was made for man, in suffering, in agony, in shame! Your Saviour pitied you; have pity on yourself!”

Giannetto raised his head—the agony of the struggle was visible in his haggard face, but the conquest was achieved. “Father, Father, I yield! Teach me to repent!”

Long hours through that night Giannetto and the Franciscan remained together. Giannetto made a full and free confession. No ear

heard or eye saw what passed between them ; but the dawn had already gleamed in the sky before they separated,—Giannetto, worn out, to throw himself on his bed ; the friar to go on with his work, fasting and in prayer, before the mercy-seat of God.

The following day was Sunday, and Elvira rose from her bed about the middle of the day ; but Giannetto did not come as usual to carry her into the music-room, and watch and tend her. Her father brought her in before going to mass, and they left her alone, anxious and watching for her husband's coming.

After they were all gone, Giannetto came quietly in and stood by her side. She raised her eyes to his face, and saw that it was very pale ; but there was a look in his eyes, as he knelt down beside her, that gave her heart such a strange bound of hope, that for one moment she was speechless.

He knelt on silently by the couch, where she lay pure as a lily and almost as white, his eyes

eagerly watching every movement of her sweet face.

“Nino,” she said at length, “I had a dream last night—such a strange dream ! It seemed to me that I lay here as usual, and yet the room was not the same. A window was before me, the lattice set wide open ; and a glorious stream of yellow light was flooding in,—and there, in the light, which shone like a golden glory, knelt our little child. Her hands were clasped in prayer, and she was dressed, like the holy Innocents, in purest white ; and all around her, shadowy, till they seemed but wings of pearl, hovered the pigeons of St Mark. The child was praying, and at times she appeared to pause and listen intently. Sadness, then anxiety, then sorrow, seemed to follow each other in shades across her face as she listened—then all changed into one brilliant, radiant smile ; her little hands were uplifted, her robe seemed to become a robe of glory, and a soft cloud hid her from my sight. There was a

sound of sweet singing in the air, and I thought I heard the words, 'Alleluia! Alleluia! a triumph has been won!' Then all passed away, till I felt something soft and warm in my arms, nestling to me, and a little voice, which said, 'Mother, mother, I have finished the work that was given me to do,'—and I awoke. It was only the first peep of dawn, but already some one was leaving the house, for I heard steps going down the street. Oh, Nino! my arms feel so empty, my heart so hungry! Nino, Nino! she never learnt to call me mother!" She hid her face, struggling with her tears.

Giannetto held her closely in his arms; then taking her small thin hands in his, he drew them on to his bowed head, as he murmured rather than spoke—"Elvira, pray for me, that God will be merciful to me a sinner."

Elvira started up, her face beaming with a perfect joy—"Oh, my Nino, is it true? Has God granted me this precious gift? Now at last I can die in peace."

"Not die, my darling ; oh, not die ! Live, to help me to atone for the bitter past !"

"Ah, Nino ! we will go home together, and kneel at your mother's knees, and she will bless us both, and all will thenceforth be peace." Then suddenly she added, "Let us go at once, Nino. Do not put it off one single day. The poor mother, she has watched and pined so long ! Ah, how happy I am now !"

"Elvira," said Giannetto, clasping her hands, "it shall be as you say ; but—but then you must learn my secret,"—and he shuddered violently. "Can you bear it ?"

"Nino," she said, gently, "there are no secrets in the grave." She lay back, breathless and exhausted.

Nino went on, speaking very gently—"Elvira mine, Fra Geronimo must go with us ; he would wish to be with you——"

"At the last," she finished ; for he had bowed his head in grief too deep for tears.

CHAPTER XII.

THE long and painful journey was over, and at last Elvira lay in her husband's early home. It had been a very difficult one : many times they had stopped on the way, terrified at the deadly weakness which crept over her, and it was always her own wish that hurried them on.


"Let us hasten, Nino," she would say—"let us hasten on ; the time grows very short." The last two hours she had to be carried in a litter on men's shoulders, for the paths to San Jacopo were too rough and narrow for any other mode of conveyance.

Every comfort and luxury that she could think of had been sent on by Signora Celeste.

She herself accompanied them part of the way, and then returned to Florence, by Elvira's special wish. Elvira had a sort of feeling that, in giving herself entirely to Carola's care, she should in some measure make up for Giannetto's long neglect.

Carola spent her days of expectation wandering through the house, arranging and rearranging, over and over again, the bed, sofa, and soft chairs which had arrived from Florence. Her joy in receiving again her long-lost son was very great. She greeted him with the brightest, happiest of looks, and refrained from one word of reproach; but the sight of her worn and altered face grieved him more than any words she could have uttered.

The Curato was much changed; he was failing fast, and very infirm. He was glad to welcome Giannetto back; but there was a certain sternness even in his welcome which Giannetto perceived at once. The good priest was far too just-minded and honest-hearted



not to show by his manner that he greatly blamed his old pupil for his long and cruel absence.

By his old companions and fellow-fishermen Giannetto was received with a good deal of awe and wonder, but little cordiality. All perceived at a glance the great disparity that had been established between them, in manner, dress, and appearance, as much as in wealth and station. It was a relief now and then to poor Carola to go out and have a comfortable chat with one or other of her friends ; for the refinement that filled her own house bewildered her. "I feel as if he were not my own son," she would say, rather piteously. "He is such a grand Signore, it would become me rather to curtsy to him, and wait upon him, than that he should do everything for me, as he does now ; and my daughter-in-law—alas ! it is sad to see how she fades away ! Truly, she is already an angel !" And the good woman brushed away a tear.

Fra Geronimo had taken up his abode in the house of young Andrea. On Sunday he preached to the fisher-congregation, and at other times visited the sick and poor, and spent his time with the good Curato.

It was evening. All was profoundly calm and still. The little waves came softly in, kissing the pebbles on the beach ; the fisher-boats dotted the almost unbroken surface of the blue wide sea ; and now and then a sea-gull, gleaming white as snow, dipped his long wings in the water, uttering his strange wild cry, and shaking off the drops, all shining, from his plumage.

Elvira lay, propped up by cushions, close to the window of her room, which looked towards the sea. It was set wide open, so that she might catch the faintest breath of air. Carola was beside her ; Giannetto knelt in his customary attitude ; Fra Geronimo sat like a statue, dark and motionless, in a corner of the room. Carola was telling

Elvira, in broken words, the early history of her son.


"It is now," she said, "some thirty years since our Giannetto was born, and before one year had passed, his father died. It was a bitter trial to me, as you may well conceive, when years passed on, and my boy, my one comfort and hope, continued speechless. We tried to think that it was only slow development—that the power of speech would come; but, alas! more and more it grew upon us as a fact, that my child was dumb—dumb from his birth. Giannetto, give her wine. This hot weather makes her faint, poor child!"

Giannetto gave her wine, which she swallowed eagerly. "Go on, go on," she said; and Carola proceeded—

"Giannetto was a good and loving child. For a long time it seemed as if his sad misfortune would not affect his happiness; but as he grew older, alas! they took to mocking him—boys and men would laugh at his infir-

mity, and make him furious. His father before him was a passionate man, but not so passionate as our Giannetto. Had it not been for the goodness of our Curato, I know not what I could have done. He took him somewhat off my hands, gave him an education, loved him, cared for him, and, as I thought, was curing him of all his wild, vain longings. Elvira, my sweet daughter, he was such a beautiful and clever boy! None in all the country round were like him—so strong, so active! Perhaps some of the taunting arose from jealousy; for no one, in work or sport, did half so well as he: and yet they seized upon his one defect, and never gave him peace.

“So it went on. As my boy grew older, he grew more sad; and yet I know not why. I thought he was becoming more resigned. Perhaps it was that I had prayed so long—that I had learnt to think I saw my prayer’s accomplishment.



“So it was—such was his state—when an English Conte came to San Jacopo ; but, Elvira, you have heard all this before ?”

Elvira shook her head. “Go on, go on,” she repeated.

“He was a good and kind-hearted man, this Signor Conte, and he took much interest in my boy. I had saved up a little sum, but very little, for then we were very poor ; and the Curato also had a few *lire*, but so few—for, just before, the little he had saved had all to be given away to a poor widow who was ill. This money we had meant to lay up, and add to, till there should be enough to send Giannetto to some great doctor who perhaps might cure him ; but when the Signor Conte heard our story, he proposed to take Giannetto with him to Nice, to let him see the doctors there.

“Ah ! who can tell our gratitude ? It seemed a gift sent straight from heaven. I wearied Madonna and San Jacopo with

thanks. He was gone three days, and on the fourth came back."

Elvira started forward—"Cured? You say he was cured?"

"Alas! no," replied Carola. "He came home driven to despair; for they had told him plainly, had said that his infirmity was quite incurable—that none ever recovered who were born dumb."

Elvira sank back. Again they gave her wine. She looked faint and exhausted, but murmured still, "Go on."

"Alas! I come to the mystery of my story. He was half mad and in despair. Every day I saw how the fire was burning within. He grew reckless; he cared not what he did. But surely, surely you have heard all this before?"

"There was a storm, so wild, so terrible, it seemed a marvel that anything alive escaped; and all night long my boy was out at sea. The great waves came roaring in; the thunder

crashed and rolled. Santa Maria! as we stood on the beach we thought the Last Day had come! With the first early streak of dawn I heard a strange sound from the sea. Elvira, you know it well. It was Giannetto singing. Over the storm it rose; it made me shrink with terror. For the first time I heard the voice of my son: his life was saved and his dumbness cured." She covered her face with her hands for one moment, then looked up, the tears streaming from her eyes. "But, alas! from that time forward he never crossed the threshold of a church — he never confessed—he spurned all holy things—he was, we feared, forsaken by his God!"

From the darkening corner where he sat, Fra Geronimo drew near. He spoke low, and with authority. "Giannetto, the time has come; tell all."

The shadows of evening were growing deeper, and Elvira lay pale and motionless.

“Elvira, you shall know all.” Giannetto’s voice was so harsh and husky, that they scarcely recognised its sound. “You, who have never known such things, how can you understand what it was to me when my hopes were dashed to the ground? How can you know? You were never shut out and isolated from your fellow-men — despised, scorned, and mocked — an outcast from them all. From a child, the rebellion in my heart had been growing stronger. Why was I born? What had I done to be so miserable? One thing that always maddened me was the sound of music. I loved it with a passionate love; and, alas! it was the sound of the human voice that was my passion.

“The Curato once gave me a violin. I had it for some days; then I told him I had lost it. It was not true—I had broken it into a thousand pieces; for I could only produce sounds which roused up all my passionate longings, and made me more embittered than

ever. He used to talk to me of resignation—it seemed such mockery! Why should I be resigned? Why was I—I only—to be singled out for laughter and for shame? What had God done for me that I should be resigned?

“Elvira, at this time that my mother tells you of, these wild and wicked thoughts were strongest. It was but shortly before that the cruel blow had fallen, when they had told me I had no hope; and I was desperate.

“I was out alone that awful night, far out at sea, when the storm came on. I was mad. I longed to die. I saw Death close to me, staring me in the face; and in my frenzy I said in my heart, ‘Let me curse God and die!’ The waves came leaping round me; the lightning seemed to rend open all the depths of the heavens. It came on me, fiercely and more fierce, that mad thought, never to go home, but out there—alone—to curse my God and die. I was on my knees, and in my agony I cried, ‘What is life to me?’

Only grant me the power of speech, and I care not for death or hell! Speech! speech! and I care not for my soul!’ Elvira, I know not how, but either from heaven or hell that awful cry was answered. I heard the first sound of my own voice, and I sank down cowering in the boat, in a terror too great for utterance. I thought I had sold my soul! Elvira, Elvira, hear me still! He says” — (catching the monk’s robe, he held it up convulsively) — “he says it may have come from God. That in that form it may have been sent as a great and terrible temptation; that my cry may have been answered from heaven, not hell. Oh, who can say what comfort those words have given me! I have thought there was no atonement. I have thought that, even if there were repentance, it would imply renunciation of my voice, my whole career. God help me! I thought that I had sold my soul! Elvira! wife!” But Elvira lay insensible.

For days after this terrible narration, Elvira hovered between life and death. At last there came a time in which they said, "All hope is over, and but few hours are left."

She lay, as usual, by the window, panting for air; and Giannetto alone was with her. In feeble, gasping words she spoke to him of hope to come, of pardon, and of peace. She was going home, she said, leaving him alone in the wide and weary world, perhaps through long, long years of penance, to expiate his sin. Giannetto's head was bowed, and he only reiterated—"Elvira! O Elvira! do not leave me!"

She told him she was going before—to pray for him. Once, in bitter anguish, he cried aloud, "My punishment is greater than I can bear." But she spoke on; and ever her words dwelt on the peace which passeth understanding—on the reward to be looked for, by God's grace, when the weary race is run.

And so the hours drew on.

Over the dark sea, over the silent streets, the night came softly down. One by one the large pale stars shone out in the southern sky.

Breaking the solemn watches of the night, came the low murmur of chanting and the tinkling of a little bell. Out of the church passed a slow procession, bearing the "Viaticum" to a passing soul. Two and two, followed the simple fishermen to the door of Giannetto's house, and then they knelt down in the street, and the priest and Fra Geronimo went in alone.

It was over. The last rites were accomplished, the last words said, and they thought that she slept. Giannetto knelt beside her bed, his eyes fixed on her face, his hands clasping hers.

Pale, and not understanding such a woe, the peasant-mother watched and wept; and the long hours stole on.

Suddenly burst a cry from Carola—"Giannetto! O Giannetto!"

"Hush, hush!" he said; "you will wake her—she sleeps!"

"Not sleep, Giannetto; it is not sleep, but death!"

Still he knelt on, as if he had not heard; and her hands were growing cold in his. All thought, all feeling gone, save one, that she was dead—his idol—his beloved—gone from him, and for ever!

Seeing that he did not move, Carola went out and called Fra Geronimo. Tenderly the Franciscan laid his hand on Giannetto's shoulder. "Giannetto," he said, "my son, come with me."

Gentle and docile as a child, Giannetto rose and followed him out, a broken-hearted man.

The fishermen were waiting for him outside in the street—foremost among them Pietro Zei—all eager to grasp his hands. "Gian-

netto ! Giannetto ! pardon us ; we knew not what we did. Ah ! pardon, pardon us ! ”

They thronged round him. Giannetto took Pietro’s outstretched hand, raising his glassy eyes from the ground. “ Friends,” he said, “ as I hope to be forgiven, I forgive you freely.”

He went on with the friar to the Curato’s house, leaving the rough fishermen sobbing like children.

A few days after the funeral of his wife, Giannetto left his native town with the Franciscan. I heard from the Curato that he had entered one of the religious orders ; and some years passed away.

Once more I heard of him. We were living near Pisa ; and one day, with a small number of friends, we visited a Carthusian monastery in a remote valley, which is very little known to the world in general. It was a wild, desolate place—the monks supporting themselves by the produce of their land, and

by the alms bestowed on them in requital for their prayers.

There were about twelve of them at the time of our visit—fewer than usual ; for fever, combined with the peculiar austerities of their order, had considerably thinned their ranks.

The women of our party were not admitted within the gates ; but I myself and a friend were taken by a lay-brother to the cell of the Superior, and round the buildings.

The Superior received us with dignified courtesy, and showed us as much of the monastery as was allowed. He conducted us into the gloomy chapel, where one or two of the white-robed monks were kneeling. They never moved when we entered, but knelt on, rigid, as if hewn out of stone. He showed us the beautiful cloister with its twisted marble pillars and vaulted roof. On the walls, cut in the stone, were the names of the dead, their secular names as well as those adopted by

them on entering the Order—the last link after death with the outer world—and among them I read this—

GIOVANNI BATTISTA NENCINI. FRA GIOVANNI.
DEO GRATIAS.

I turned to the Superior and asked him when this penitent had died. “Two years ago,” he said. “Fra Giovanni led the holiest of lives. He practised every penance and austerity permitted by our rule ; and from the time he took the vows, he never spoke again. No ear ever heard the sound of his voice till the last moment of his life. He died of the *malaria* in the heat of summer. He lay on ashes in the chapel, for such was his humble desire ; and when the last moment came, he stretched out his arms as if to grasp some vision, and fell back murmuring ‘Deo gratias.’ And see, we had those words engraved below his name.”

It was, from first to last, a strange story,

and one that I can never forget. I wished to hear more of those years after Elvira's death ; but the Curato was dead, and I could find no trace of Fra Geronimo. I sought after him for some time, and did not give up the quest till I had learnt that he had been sent on some far-off foreign mission in the East.



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